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Publication date:
2018

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Adaptive Agency and Arab American Womanhood 1893 - 1967

PhD Thesis

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Date of Submission: 06. July 2018

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Title:	Adaptive Agency and Arab American Womanhood, 1893–1967
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Date of submission:	06. July 2018
Number of words:	94,887

Abstract

My dissertation develops a new perspective on Arab American cultural histories during the early to mid-20th century in the US. I focus mostly on Syrian and Lebanese American women in the Northeast and their strategies of self-representation. Archival traces of these women's public visibility are scarce and distributed across a wide range of media: photography, reader comments, correspondence, club minutes or unpublished memoirs. Through adaptive agency women select and incorporate widely legible elements of hegemonic, racialized tropes of womanhood in their cultural, narrative or embodied forms of self-representation. These adaptive choices can be traced across different kinds of archival material and thus reveal how Arab American women positioned themselves in the US cultural sphere. The four case studies analyze how adaptive agency shaped and changed visions of Arab American womanhood over time, looking at a juxtaposition of belly dancers' embodiments of harem fantasies to early 1900 Syrian American family photography, the archive of *The Syrian World* newspaper in the 1920s, the legacies of club women in the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston in the interwar years and the unpublished memoir of the Lebanese American beauty queen Rosemary Hakim in 1955. My research shows that Arab American women used adaptive agency, often via repertoires of respectability, to mitigate their racial ambivalence in the US context. In doing so, they engaged in trans/national and local conversations about race, gender and belonging. This dissertation seeks to highlight the role of gender and women's agency in early Arab American community formation, and that Arab American women's self-representations did not only address orientalist frames, but also racial legacies of slavery, immigration exclusions and ethno-nationalisms.

Resumé

Min afhandling præsenterer et nyt perspektiv på den arabisk-amerikanske kulturhistorie. Analysen fokuserer primært på syriske og libanesiske kvinders selvrepræsentation i begyndelsen af og frem til midten af det 20. århundrede i det nordøstlige USA. Der findes kun få spor efter disse kvinder i det offentlige rum, og dokumentationen er spredt på tværs af en bred vifte af medier: fotografi, læserkommentarer, brevvekslinger, foreningsreferater og ikke-offentliggjorte erindringer. Gennem adaptive agency udvælger og inkorporerer kvinderne elementer af hegemoniske, race- og kønnede troper i deres kulturelle, narrative og fysiske former for selvrepræsentation. Disse tilpasningsvalg kan spores på tværs af forskellige typer af arkivmaterialer og afslører, hvordan arabisk-amerikanske kvinder positionerede sig selv i den amerikanske kultursfære. De fire casestudier analyserer, hvordan deres adaptive agency med tiden formede og ændrede forestillinger om arabisk-amerikansk kvindelighed. Afhandlingen starter med en sammenstilling af mavedans som udtryk for haremsfantasier og syrisk-amerikanske familiefotografier i begyndelsen af 1900-tallet, og analyserer herefter avisen *The Syrian World* fra 1920'erne, arven efter kvinderne i Syrian Ladies Aid Society i Boston i mellemkrigsårene og den libanesisk-amerikanske skønhedsdronning Rosemary Hakims upublicerede erindringer fra 1955. Min forskning viser, at arabisk-amerikanske kvinder anvendte adaptive agency, ofte gennem respektabilitetsrepertoirer, til at afbøde deres racemæssige ambivalens i en amerikansk kontekst. Hermed indgik de i en trans/national og lokal dialog om race, køn og tilhørsforhold. Afhandlingen søger at fremhæve kvinders indvirken på den tidlige arabisk-amerikanske samfundsdannelse, og at arabisk-amerikanske kvinders selvrepræsentationer ikke kun rettede sig mod orientalistiske rammer, men også mod den racemæssige arv fra slaveri, udstødelse af indvandrere og etnonationalisme.

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Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues, friends and family. I want to sincerely thank everyone who has helped me throughout this journey and I owe my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Martyn Bone and my co-supervisor Silvia Schultermandl. Thank you for your thoughtful guidance throughout the entire PhD process and your dedication to supporting my research and professional development! You have generously shared your expertise, international networks and given me also room to find my own way in the project. I cannot thank you enough for all your constructive comments, encouragement and mentorship.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Copenhagen for the PhD fellowship that allowed me to carry out my research in the best possible way. And many thanks to everyone at the EnGeRom department for offering a wonderful academic home, with special thanks to the former and current PhD coordinators Inge Brigitte Siegumfeldt and Pia Schwarz Lausten and my colleague Christa Holm Vogelious. I have also greatly benefitted from exchanges with my fellow PhD students, and I would like to especially thank Joseph Ballan and Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder for our ethnic studies reading group and Maria Jørgensen and Astrid Rasch for our writing exchanges. And thank you also to Jesper Præst Nielsen for co-organizing an inspiring early career workshop. I further greatly appreciated Clara Juncker's comments and advice at my pre-defense as well as Walter Hölbling's and Joshua Sabih's support of my research in the transition to and beginnings of my PhD.

My PhD experience would not have been the same without my research stay at Brown University in the fall of 2015. I sincerely thank Matt Guterl for supporting my stay and for offering advice and comments on my project during and beyond my semester at Brown. I would like to

further thank the faculty and graduate students at the American Studies department, in particular Felicia Bevel and Ida Yalzadeh, for making me feel at home right away.

I am particularly grateful for all the assistance given by librarians and archivists throughout my research in locating archival sources digitally or physically. I want to especially thank Kirsten Terry and the Arab American National Museum. Kirsten was so kind to scan and send a copy of the Rosemary Hakim memoir in the fall of 2014 before it was digitally available. A year later the AANM's Evelyn Abdalah Menconi Travel Grant enabled me to spend 10 days in their physical archives, which laid the foundations for my entire project. I would further like to thank Elyssa Bisoski for her help in obtaining image use permissions.

I also want to acknowledge the formative experience during my MA studies at the Cultural Analysis and Theory department at SUNY Stony Brook prior to my PhD research. These years have shaped my academic training and built a research community that has stayed with me over the years. I am very grateful for the Fulbright Fellowship that allowed me to pursue this program and thank you Sofia and Marit, Che-hi, and Rachel for your friendship and wisdom.

Last, but not least, I am immensely grateful for my family and friends, old and new. Thank you to the KOZI for maintaining our bonds home in Graz, and thank you to all our new friends in Scandinavia who enriched our PhD lives and shared, of late, the experiences of academic motherhood. A heartfelt thank you to my sisters Anna and Eva, my little brother Felix, Oma and my parents, Margit and Hans-Michael, without whose unwavering support, love and dedication I would not have managed this journey. With my deepest gratitude and love I thank my husband Hakim and my daughter Sofia. I could not have finished this dissertation without you. Sofia, thank you for bringing us so much joy, and Hakim, thank you for your love, true companionship and unconditional support on every step of the way!

Introduction

On January 12th, 1897, a sensational trial filled a New York court room to the brim. The audience was buzzing with excitement as the court expected its most prominent witness: a woman named 'Little Egypt.' A few weeks prior, police captain George S. Chapman had raided Barnum Seeley's bachelor party at Sherry's, looking for the infamous belly dancer 'Little Egypt.' He was following a lead that the dancer was allegedly hired to do an oriental dance and appear naked, a moral crime at the time. However, Chapman's raid was unsuccessful, and the bachelors took the captain to court over the intrusion, where he sought to defend his actions: hence it became known as "the Chapman trial." Through the trial the tumultuous bachelor party reached fame nationwide as the "Awful Seeley Dinner" (Carlton 76), particularly because Chapman did not manage to find 'Little Egypt'— she was hidden on the premises—and rumor had it that she may indeed have danced naked. Patrons claimed they kept sending her wine to maintain her spirits, and that she performed later in the night after Chapman had left ("High Jinks at New York" 1). The case for the justification of the raid then rested on the question of whether or not 'Little Egypt' had been hired to dance naked. During the early weeks of the trial 'Little Egypt' herself kept the media guessing as to if and when she would appear in court. By the time she agreed to testify publicly, in exchange for immunity ("Offered as State's Evidence" 5), the public's curiosity had reached a fever pitch. The reporter from the *Boston Daily Globe* described her entrance as follows:

> As the gaping crowd turned toward the open door, the thoughtful recognized again with fearful force the moral harm done at this trial. . . Behind him [Mr. Howe] strode "Little Egypt," as this dancing woman is pleased to call herself. She carried her head high, and, as she entered, she looked around boldly, curiously. Her face

> was painted, as were the faces of those who danced before the Pharaoh of old. Her lips were painted a fiery red that set off by the contrast of the ivory whiteness of her fine teeth . . . The dress fitted her from neck to heels as if she had melted in the stifling atmosphere and been poured into it. Pray be patient with this description—a man writes it ("A La Tribly" 1).

The reporter's fascination with 'Little Egypt's appearance—her bold make-up, fiery lips, and fitted dress—was not only sexually objectifying, but also exhibited a decidedly orientalist imagination of a mysterious, exotic woman who seemed to come from the Pharaohs' Egypt far away in space and time. Ashea Wabe, the woman behind the 'Little Egypt' pseudonym, relished the attention and deliberately played her part. Wabe chose to adapt certain orientalist stock elements to create her appearance as 'Little Egypt,' a strategy of self-representation that I call "adaptive agency."

The success of Wabe's performance as a belly dancer, and as a public persona at court, depended on this kind of agency. Her embodied performance incorporated widely legible elements of racial, gendered and orientalist stereotypes, which in turn facilitated her popularity among US audiences. This strategic translation and adaptation places Wabe in the wider tradition of auto-Orientalism in self-representation and Arab American cultural production. Auto-Orientalisms are an inherently transnational phenomenon: Christina Civantos coined this term in her research on Arab Argentine authors who used orientalist tropes and conventions in their writing to claim access to Argentine national subjecthood (22). In the US context, Waïl S. Hassan demonstrates that the cultural translation of orientalist tropes was also an important element of early Arab American literature produced by the Mahjar generation of the early twentieth century (47). However,

research on such auto-orientalist forms of cross-cultural translation and adaptation in the early twentieth century has largely focused on male-dominated literary and cultural production.

My dissertation seeks to expand this framework, both in terms of archival research and methodological approach, to uncover the traces of early Arab and Syrian American women's cultural agency in the US public sphere. Performing and writing in English to reach American audiences, women developed strategies of self-representation that adapted, but were not confined to, orientalist and nationalist conventions. Arab American women writers at the turn of the twentieth century, most notably Afifa Karam, were certainly a prominent part of the early Arab American literary scene, and Karam was very much engaged in feminist debates and women's rights. However, Karam's work was written in Arabic and often addressed a readership in the homeland. When it comes to the public visibility of women in the US, who were engaging in English with Arab/Syrian American *and* wider US American audiences, they often did not have access to formally published literature. In doing so, these women had to negotiate orientalist stereotypes. However, the theory of auto-Orientalism alone cannot fully account for all the facets of their adaptive agency, as they also had to negotiate their position in US racial imaginaries that were mediated via immigration discourses as well as exclusionary tropes of white, middle-class womanhood.

My research, drawing on archival sources that reflect upon different aspects of early Arab American women's embodied, social and cultural agency, shows that these women did engage in national conversations about race, gender and belonging. However, they often did so in ways that remained outside centralized archives or institutionalized forms of publication. My dissertation turns to these understudied media, such as photography, reader comments, correspondence, club minutes or unpublished memoirs, which document written, oral or embodied modes of engagement

between women and public spheres. Within these modes of engagement, I focus specifically on the role of adaptation in self-representation.

Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as being at the same time the product *and* the process of an announced referentiality to prior cultural works (7-8). I apply this analytical view of adaptation as a self-referential, artistic process to the circulations of hegemonic racial and gendered tropes. Adaptive agency refers here to a personal adaptation of widely recognizable elements from hegemonic narratives and tropes into cultural self-representation. The wide-spread legibility of the incorporated references to cultural or social ideals offers otherwise marginalized people, such as ethnic minorities and/or women, a degree of access to the US public sphere. Such adaptive agency, both in embodied and discursive modes, then confirms and unsettles stereotypes at the same time. The central issue, I believe, is not whether adaptive agency 'resists' prejudice, but rather its usefuleness as a method for historical analysis. Paying attention to the multiple racial and gendered tropes Arab American women negotiated offers new perspectives on their ambivalent position as 'white, but not quite white', oriental immigrant women in the US.

Arab American history was often shaped by particular crossroads between Arab Americans' needs and popular US narratives. Hegemonic narratives and popular culture were (and are) thus central to understanding Arab American racial ambivalence (Naber 23). My dissertation expands upon this understanding by examining the role of gender in how Arab American women negotiated US orientalist binaries, nationalisms and the twin racial legacies of slavery and immigration. Adaptive agency certainly was not the only strategy of self-representation employed to navigate these frames, but I show that it was a significant element of how Arab and Syrian American women managed their racially ambivalent position between US Orientalisms and

black/white binaries and that it offers multi-ethnic perspectives on Arab American histories beyond assimilation paradigms.

The Scope of this Dissertation

The Chicago World Fair in 1893 represents a point of multiple departures for my project. The 1890s mark the beginning of large scale Syrian Arab migration to the US, as well as the increasing formalization of Jim Crow segregation laws which rolled back African American gains during the Reconstruction era. When it comes to the self-representation of African and Arab American women during this time, the World Fair was an important intersection in these histories. The position of both communities in the US racial imaginary was framed by gendered stereotypes, most prominently by sexualized imaginations of Arab and Black womanhood. African Americans had been systematically excluded from the World Fair expositions, but black women claimed a public presence at the World's Congress of Representative Women, held at the Fair, to make their voices heard in spite of this exclusion. On May 20th, 1893, a range of leading black spokeswomen addressed the Congress delegates. Anna Julia Cooper took the opportunity to contrast the desperate struggle of black women (particularly from the South) for sexual autonomy with the privileged position of white women who had access to respectable womanhood and humanity. Cooper fought for the education and access to equal rights for black women in her teaching, lecturing and writing, and she was concerned with the rising numbers of Southern black girls lured into the North, where they were often forced into prostitution (Carby 3-4).

Black women slaves had been systematically abused during US chattel slavery to ensure the reproduction of the labor force. To justify this sexual abuse culturally, the Jezebel stereotype painted black woman as sexually voracious and immoral. The lingering legacies of this stereotype

still informed the ongoing exploitation of black women in the late nineteenth century. To fight these legacies, Cooper (and other African American women writers like Frances Harper or Pauline Hopkins) were determined to prove the respectability of black women and to gain full access to the privileges of 'proper' American womanhood (hooks 166-7). These notions were deeply embedded in the white, middle class standards Barbara Welter's defined as True Womanhood during the nineteenth century: a specific conception of idealized, national Anglo American womanhood, based on tenants of "piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness" (152), which emerged during slavery to specifically exclude black women from respectability (Christian 23). While the black women speakers at the Congress were trying to claim respectability for black womanhood, next door, on the Cairo Street, the hyper-sexualization of Arab women's bodies in the US entered a new phase. The Cairo Street was part of the Midway Plaisance, a park that featured the amusement area of the World Fair. The Egyptian section introduced American audiences to the 'hootchy koochty': belly dancing in the guise of orientalist harem fantasies.

Representations of harems had already circulated within US Orientalisms prior to the Chicago World Fair and in many different forms. These representations dated as far back as the publication of captivity narratives in response to the Barbary Wars of the 1800s and the dissemination of the Arabian Nights tales as well as orientalist European dramas and comic operas, all of which were extremely popular among American audiences (Marr 43-50). Harem fantasies further circulated via photographs, paintings and travel narratives in Europe and the US throughout the nineteenth century. Belly dancing too had already become popular entertainment in British colonial camps and European World Fairs prior to 1893; however, the Chicago World Fair marked the introduction of belly dancing performances to the US. Co-inciding with the rise of mass cultural production and consumerism, this specific entry facilitated a significant shift in scale, reach, and

in the kind of harem stereotypes in the US cultural landscape (Jarmakani, *Imagining* 21-24). These embodied performances allowed American audiences to literally buy access to imagined harems, solidifying a shift in US Orientalisms from Holy Land fantasies—the nineteenth century US fascination with the Holy Land as the origin of Christianity and by extension the US American nation—toward sexualized and commercialized notions of Eastern luxury. The harem trope served to legitimize British and French colonial enterprises as civilizing missions, even as they were divorced from any material reality of the harem as a communal, daily life space for women (37).[1] In early US Orientalisms, harems had a slightly different function: they were embedded in discourses of military threat, missionary zeal and the national superiority of the early US republic, in which the fascination with harems usually served to underline a contrast between Christian morality and Muslim polygamy (Marr 49). After the Chicago World Fair in 1893, US harem fantasies shifted from emphasizing moral superiority to sexual spectacle, and this shift was directly related to the popularity of belly dancing shows.

The case of Ashea Wabe with which I began both captures this shift and reflects the cultural and political stakes of my central argument. Wabe's adaptive agency shows she not only negotiated gendered and racialized ideas of Arab womanhood in the United States, but also influenced their very terms. Wabe had to engage with both European colonial harem fantasies and the specific ways US Orientalisms imagined Arab womanhood. Amira Jarmakani points out that in the United

[1] When I use the term 'harem' I am referring to the orientalist imagination and not historical harems. In Muslim majority countries the term harem referred to the women's part of the house and this division of spaces aimed at providing women privacy—men were forbidden to enter, but women could leave it any time (Jaramkani, *Imagining* 37). Historically the lavish harem at royal courts, such as those of Ottoman rulers in Istanbul, may be one of the closest approximations to an orientalist imagined harem. However, this luxurious setting was a specifically Turkish upper-class phenomenon. Vaka Brown mentions in *Haremlik* that she had troubles even finding any such places. "(…) although I had been in many haremliks, I had never happened to be in one where more than one wife was living, and they had all been somewhat Europeanized. Selim Pasha's was the first old-fashioned harem which was opening its doors to me "(63).

States by the early twentieth century specific imaginations about Arab womanhood had solidified into a cultural mythology centered on the belly dancer figure (2). The belly dancer offered a projection screen for Arab women, who were seen simultaneously (and contradictorily) as erotic, bold belly dancers and oppressed harem slaves. Jarmakani argues that this seeming variety of tropes (when, in fact, the dichotomy itself collapses the sexualized/oppressed harem woman into one image) serves to further authenticate the belly dancers as a real representation of harems and Arab women (6-7). Wabe claimed auto-orientalist agency in translating the colonial European harem imaginations to the US cultural contexts and by adapting the expectations of 'authentic' harem woman. My analysis in chapter one, however, shows that in doing so she drew on not only imagined Arab womanhood, but also stereotypical notions of black women's sexual appeal/availability to white men that were specific to the US history of racial slavery, such as the Jezebel figure. Analyzing which elements Wabe chose to adapt and how they are received—that is, her adaptive agency as a performer in the public sphere—reveals that Wabe's embodied performance actively merges the cultural legacy of slavery with harem fantasies, shaping the terms of a specifically *US American* harem scenario.

While my research departs from the premise that imagined Arab womanhood and orientalist stereotypes affected all Arab American women to some degree,[2] it expands this perspective to account for the varied adaptive uses of hegemonic US ideals, such as white middle class and immigrant womanhood, among early Syrian American women. Ashea Wabe's case offers a useful point of departure to unravel the links between self-representation, imagined Arab womanhood and US racial imaginaries, but it does not capture the experience and possibilities for

[2] Hassan argues that "no Arab immigrant in the U.S. could avoid engaging with American Orientalisms in some fashion, considering its entrenchment in American culture, its inextricable links to race as a fundamental component of American identity" (21).

self-representation of the vast majority of Arab, mostly Syrian Christian, women immigrating to the US at that time. Despite their obvious differences, the public agency of these women is hard to trace. On the national stage, the stereotypical hyper-visibility of belly dancing performances renders the women like Wabe who were behind these performances nearly invisible. While budding Syrian American communities established a public forum in newspapers and literary circles, the Mahjar writers, journalists and intellectuals dominating this forum were men. The 'minor,' perhaps less prestigious, ways of public engagement of Syrian American women were not documented in written archives to the same degree. I thus argue that adaptive agency offers a useful analytical lens to uncover traces of women's agency in both embodied performance and specific kinds of archival material, such as reader comments to the English language Arab press, club minutes, or personal notes and memoirs.

By 1915, Syrian American communities had achieved access to US citizenship and legal whiteness, but culturally they always remained in a precarious proximity to whiteness that could be revoked any time (Naber 21-3). Scholars have described this in-between status as being "white, but not quite white" (Hatab Samhan 209) or as being "honorary whites" (Majaj 321). The role of gender-specific forms of cultural adaptations that shaped Arab American racial ambivalence prior to 1967 have not yet received enough scholarly attention. Adaptations of imagined womanhoods were an important part of the communities' efforts to stabilize their cultural proximity to whiteness. However, gender-focused adaptive agency was not a straightforward path to assimilation into American whiteness either. I have structured my case studies on Arab and Syrian-Lebanese American women's self-representation around nationally dominant tropes of womanhood relevant for the given context, such as True Womanhood, the New Woman, the Club

Woman, Immigrant Motherhood, or the Beauty Queen. These tropes shift over time and all engage with US racial hierarchies in ways that affect, but also exceed Syrian American women.

Any adaptation of recognizable elements of these tropes then places Syrian American women in relation to multiple layers of US racial imaginaries. Many of these ideals were coded as white, middle-class, national norms in opposition to supposedly impure, hypersexual black womanhood. In addition to these legacies of slavery that shaped a strict black/white racial binary, Arab and Syrian American women faced racialization via orientalist stereotypes *and* via immigration discourses. Immigration exclusion had been another central driver of the US racial system, legally as well as culturally, and anxieties about immigrant womanhood were specific, discursive elements that framed Syrian American women's possibilities for public self-representation. I thus apply adaptive agency as an analytical lens to trace how women negotiated the often-contradictory simultaneity of their positions in, or in-between, orientalist, racial, immigrant and gendered discourses that informed socio-cultural inclusion into US national subjecthood.

Chapter one looks at some of the earliest available archival records that trace Arab American women's presence in the public sphere through embodied performances: Syrian American family photography and belly dancing. I focus here on the public records of Ashea Wabe's racially ambiguous performance as 'Little Egypt' in the Seeley Scandal and its relationship to the photographic documentation of Syrian American women's respectability politics and its multi-ethnic affinities. Chapter two examines the reception of the musical *Anna Ascends* (1920) in the national press and its reprint in *The Syrian World* in 1927/8. The musical tells a tale of 'racial' uplift about a Syrian American waitress, and its national reception allows me to gauge how Syrian American womanhood was perceived by the wider public. I further draw on the reader comments

in *The Syrian World* (1926-32) as a forum where the meaning of Syrian American womanhood was negotiated within the community. Chapter three turns to the archive of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston. The Ladies ran charity events and soon became the social backbone of the local community. I look at how these women used their adaptive agency as club women to project a vision of proper Syrian American womanhood far beyond Boston and across the entire Syrian diaspora. Their successful performance of respectability then also afforded them more personal, cultural and political power in the community, as well as more leeway within US racial hierarchies. The fourth and final chapter turns to the emergence of a specifically Lebanese American ethnic identity in the 1950s, embodied and represented transnationally by Rosemary Hakim in her role as Miss Lebanon America of 1955. I analyze how Hakim's narrative self-fashioning in her unpublished memoir *Arabian Antipodes* on the one hand adapts typical auto-orientalist tropes, but, on the other hand, destabilizes orientalist stereotypes through her romantic interest in Muslim business men, her engagement in US Cold War diplomacy, and her active celebration of 'modern,' transnational Arab American womanhood.

My dissertation does not seek to provide full historical coverage or a definite history of Arab American women's self-representation. Rather, by applying my specific methodological lens of adaptive agency to selected sources, my work contributes to expanding our understanding of women's roles in these early histories of community formation. Most of the present material comes from the collections stored at the Arab American National Museum (AANM) in Detroit: The Michael W. Suleiman, Evelyn Shakir and Rosemary Hakim Collections. I supplement my primary source material from these AANM holdings—the newspaper *The Syrian World*, the musical *Anna Ascends*, the archive of *The Syrian Ladies Aid Society* in Boston and the unpublished memoir *Arabian Antipodes*—with additional sources from the New York Public Library, the Naff

Collection at the Smithsonian, historical newspapers and photographs from the Family History Archive of Syrian and Lebanese Families in the American South (AANM Online Collections). Some of these archival materials have not yet been analyzed as part of Arab American studies scholarship. For example, I focus on and explicate material in the Rosemary Hakim collection, the unpublished memoir and correspondence of the Miss Lebanon American 1955, in chapter four. In other cases, I use adaptive agency to bring new perspectives on the more widely known sources (for example, in the Michael W. Suleiman and Evelyn Shakir collections) to the fore.

I have chosen to limit my period of study to the decades prior to the 1960s, as the time after 1967 is characterized by a marked shift in the ethnic composition of the Arab American community itself, as well as in orientalist stereotypes, the racializing of Arabness, and imaginations of womanhood in the US at large. The connection between US racial imaginaries and foreign politics needs to be always conceived of as relational, but Moustafa Bayoumi identifies a general shift in emphasis of the factors that impacted Arab American life. After 1967, racial profiling and popular-cultural stereotyping of Arabs was much more driven by US foreign policy in the Middle East, while the pre-1967 Arab American experience was more shaped by the domestic changes in ethnic categories and racial thinking (264). The predominant tendency in Arab American studies is to attribute the formation of a pan-Arab American identity to the impact of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 and the overwhelmingly one-sided US approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict (see, for example, Naff; Suleiman, *Arabs*; Hatab Samhan). This watershed moment in 1967 and the subsequent biased media and political discourse against Palestinians specifically, and Arabs more broadly, brought together in a shared political concern the assimilated earlier generations and the Arab newcomers who arrived after the re-opening of immigration quotas in 1965. The 1960s, then, not only saw a peak in civil rights and women's rights struggles that changed conversations about

race and gender at large, but also US Orientalisms shifted again towards an increasingly strong association of Arabness with Islam and threat. The 1967 war, followed by the Iranian hostage crisis, the Gulf Wars, and significant anxiety about and surveillance of Arab American political activists at home, hardened orientalist stereotypes about "reel bad Arabs" (Shaheen).[3] The 2001 terrorist attack on the World Tarde Center in New York further galvanized these anxieties and the anti-Arab backlash after 9/11 represents in many ways not a radically new phase of anti-Arab racism, but rather a peak in the fluctuating currents of orientalist stereotypes.

Much recent scholarship has tended to focus on the immediate consequences of 9/11 for the position of Arab Americans within racial hierarchies.[4] Current orientalist stereotypes mostly center on the opposition of dangerous, male Muslim/Arab terrorists and oppressed, veiled Muslim women, which on the surface seems to be radically different from the pre-1967 tropes of exotic and consumerist Orientalisms. My dissertation, however, hopes to contribute some new perspectives to these contemporary scholarly discussions as well. My case studies show that the roots of current orientalist stereotypes already register in the early histories of Arab American self-representation and in the formation of US racial and gendered imaginaries before the 1960s. The discursive emphasis between exotic and racializing Orientalisms may shift over time, but these

[3] Jack Shaheen's seminal work *Reel Bad Arabs* documents the manifold and persistent ways in which Hollywood productions stereotyped Arabs as villains over the entire twentieth century.

[4] At the 2002 MENA conference Arab American studies scholars found themselves at the center of attention. Arab American themes had been marginal to Middle Eastern studies previously, and issues of race and anti-Arab racism had been a minor focus area in Arab American studies as well. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 the political and cultural fall out against Arab Americans in the US had shifted both the terms of conversation and centered scholarly attention on the relationship of Arab Americans to US racial formation. Nadine Naber describes this conference as starting point for scholarly-activist organizing around anti-Arab racism. Their subsequent publication on *Race and Arab Americans Pre/Post 9/11* maps the ambiguities of Arab American immigration onto the histories of US racial formation. And even if the volume cannot present a one size fits all approach to Arab Americans and race, as both ethnic backgrounds and experiences of discrimination may differ vastly for individual Arab Americans, the sum of contributions make it painstakingly clear that the peak in post 9/11 anti-Arab racism requires both a contemporary and historical re-evaluation of the relationships of Arabness and its relationship to Blackness/Whiteness in US history.

various currents always palimpsestuously register over one another. An analytical focus on adaptation is one way to uncover the constant interruptions of seemingly hidden meanings between these layers – in US popular culture as well as in Arab American self-representation. For example, my research shows that the early Syrian American Christian women already worked with the specter of racialized Muslim womanhood to claim their own fitness for American citizenship, while such generalized associations of Arab womanhood with Oriental Otherness always already undercut aspirations to Syrian American whiteness.

This example also illustrates that the ethnic heterogeneity of Arab Americans is difficult to describe without glossing over internal differences due to the ethnic, religious and political heterogeneity of Arab immigrant communities.[5] In this dissertation I use the term 'Syrian American' and 'Lebanese American' womanhood in the respective case studies that draw on Syrian or Lebanese American archives and communities. Much of my analysis focuses on representations of Syrian American womanhood to account for the fact that the majority of pre-1965 Arab immigrants came from the greater Syrian-Lebanese region. In contexts that speak to more general, discursive negotiations of 'Arabness' and theoretical concerns, I use the term 'Arab American' womanhood as an umbrella term that seeks to highlight the shared contextual factors that early women immigrants—from belly dancers in 1893 to Miss Lebanon America 1955—faced in the US. Despite varying individual experiences, people perceived as Arab experienced similar exclusion mechanisms, and the need to identify and represent themselves as a 'racially recognizable' group in the US applies to pre- and post-war contexts.

[5] "The term 'Arab Americans' refers to the immigrants to North America from the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and their descendants" (Suleiman, *Arabs* 1). Suleiman includes also ethnically non-Arab states that are members of the League of Arab States, such as Somalia or Djibouti, and a range of religious and ethnic subgroups of Christian, Muslim (Sunni, Shia, Druze) and other denominations (1-2).

Finally, I should note that the use of the label 'Syrian American' before World War II functionally resembled the contemporary use of 'Arab American' as an umbrella term that represents a wide variety of ethnic affiliations. In archival materials, pre-1899 Arab migrants from the then Ottoman empire are mostly categorized as Greek, Turkish or Armenian. However, the decades between 1900 and 1940 saw a predominant use of the label 'Syrian' to represent all Arabic speaking immigrants; in addition to a Syrian-Lebanese majority, this label also included Palestinians, Druze and other minor ethnic groups. During and after World War II, 'Lebanese American' communities began to claim their own identity apart from the Syrian umbrella category more openly, and my final chapter accounts for the time between 1948 and 1965 as a distinct phase in Arab American history that was marked by emerging Lebanese American nationalism and by the beginning influx of Palestinian refugees coming to the United States (Fadda-Conrey 12). [6]

Early Arab Immigration and the Assimilation Narrative

The first wave of Arab migration to the US was part of the larger European mass migration from mostly Eastern and Southern European countries and lasted from the 1880s until 1924. At that time Arabs, people arriving from Syria, Mount Lebanon and Palestine, were all considered Ottoman subjects, from "Turkey in Asia." After 1899, probably due to increasing numbers of arrivals from the Ottoman province of Syria, Arabic speaking immigrants were labeled globally as "Syrians" (Hatab Samhan 216). Why did these people emigrate? Overall there is a scholarly consensus that these early Arab emigrants left mostly due to economic reasons, while post-1965 Arab emigrants had more diverse backgrounds and often fled conflict or war. There remains some

[6] Orfalea estimates that about one-fourth of post-1948 Arab migrants to the US were Palestinians, and until 1965 they dominated the second wave of migration (152-3).

contention about to what degree political persecution of religious minorities in the Ottoman empire, in addition to economic factors, played a role in emigration (Naber 9-10). Alixa Naff, for example, contends that Mount Lebanon around 1900 was prosperous and relatively autonomous. While some people fled due to repression and hardship after World War I, she argues that it was mostly the "accelerating urbanization and industrialization" of the United States that attracted new labor ("The Early" 26). Michael Suleiman, on the other hand, points to two major economic crises that hit late nineteenth century Mount Lebanon: the opening of the Suez Canal, which allowed cheaper Japanese silk to compete with Lebanese silk, and a devastating bug invasion of the local vineyards. In his view, these economic pressures coalesced with increasing religious persecution and the loss of former religious privileges, when the waning Ottoman empire began drafting Christian citizens into its army (*Arabs* 2-3). [7] This may also explain why the vast majority of emigrants were Lebanese or Syrian Christians.[8]

Foundational Arab American studies scholar like Naff, and Phillip K. Hitti already in the 1920s, document the many different facets that contributed to emigration, but more recently their own work on the formation of Arab American communities in the US has come under scrutiny in

[7] Syria had always been a multi-religious society organized around the Islamic principles of a Muslim umma (community) and Christians and Jews as protected classes therein. As protected minorities Christians and Jews developed their own community centers, which eventually were incorporated as semi-autonomous units into the Ottoman empire under the millet system. For example, Christians settled in Mount Lebanon, Muslims in Syria and Druze in small pockets in both regions, including a range of mixed villages. The concept of ethno-nationalist divisions along religious lines was introduced in the nineteenth century via Western colonialist interventions and began to undermine the traditional 'millet system.' The system allowed the Ottomans easy administration of tax collection, but also afforded some benefits, like exemption from military service, to its communities. Late Ottoman restrictions of such benefits and the agitation of Christian-Muslim conflicts by Western missionaries were factors that would have encouraged Christian minorities to emigrate to the US, and the US as a Christian majority nation may also have been perceived as more welcoming of Christian than Muslim Syrians (Naff, *Becoming* 49-50).

[8] Early migration records do not distinguish the multinational and multi-ethnic origins of Ottoman subjects and Syrians themselves would have identified by religious and familial affiliations. It is thus difficult to ascertain the exact backgrounds of these early migrants, but Naff estimates that about 90% of these arrivals were Christians from Mount Lebanon, in addition to a few Syrian Muslims, Druzes and Palestinians (Naff, "The Early" 25).

the field for its assimilationist bent and homogenizing of the Arab immigrant narrative. This assimilation narrative usually centered on how Syrians became successful pack peddlers, spreading across the nation, accumulating capital, and eventually ascending in class and assimilating into Americanness. Naff's collection of oral histories and documents provides invaluable insights into the early Arab American experience, but her interpretation focuses on middle-class ascent, ease in assimilation, and lack of political or nationalist organizing. She goes so far as to state that the second generation was left without any knowledge of their cultural roots, an ethnic void filled by American mythology, and that the first wave of Arab immigrants would have "assimilated themselves out of existence" ("The Early" 35) if Arab migration had not restarted after World War II. Another pioneer of Arab American studies, Michael Suleiman, similarly frames early Arab migration as centered on "Americanization," which "was seen as a process of shedding old loyalties, the traditional culture, and the Arabic language" (*Arabs* 8).

Scholars such as Sarah Gualtieri, Akram Khater, and Hani Bawardi have begun to re-write this common narrative of straightforward Arab American immigrant assimilation in the early phases of migration. Khater points out that the Syrian American community should not only be understood within a US-centric frame of reference, as many people returned to their homelands or moved back and forth, thereby establishing a transnational, Syrian American middle-class community. Gualtieri's research shows that those Syrian Americans who chose to stay in the US were very much involved in managing their own assimilation/ethnic identity formation (*Between* 151). In this dissertation, I heed her call to scholars to not just analyze the Arab American experience as a story of assimilation, but to rather consider how early Syrian American communities "defined themselves as Syrian and as American at the same time" (14). Bawardi argues further that there was a significant amount of nationalist organizing among early Arab

American communities, whose respective Syrian and Lebanese nationalisms were far from homogeneous. Bawardi's research suggests that during the interwar years Syrian nationalism was a major vehicle for diaspora politics, which already developed a sense of pan-Arab identity otherwise usually attributed to the post World War II period (23-33).

In the realm of cultural production, there is also evidence for such a decidedly Syrian *and* American ethnic identity in the literary production of the early Mahjar intellectuals. Wail Hassan's and Jacob Berman's respective analyses of the foundational texts of Arab American literature, such as Ameen Rihani's *The Book of Khalid* (1911), show that Mahjar intellectuals not only poked fun at orientalist East/West binaries, but also used stereotypical figures, such as the Syrian pack peddler, as figures of emplacement into an explicitly Syrian American identity, rather than a figure of transition into assimilation. My own research contributes to these revisions of the assimilation narrative by looking at the diverse strategies of self-representation of early Syrian American women, and my specific focus on women's *cultural* self-representation moves beyond the dominant peddling paradigm within Arab American history as well.

Women have played a central role in the formation of Syrian American communities. Many Syrian women followed their husbands, emigrated to join other family members or came on their own. Many of these women worked in factories or held other professions, and their public visibility as working women challenged the US American patriarchal ideals of women's domesticity (Gualtieri, *Between* 138). Historical research in Arab American on these early women immigrants often focuses on their public role as peddlers. However, the narrow focus in scholarship on this peddling thesis may obscure other ways Syrians engaged with US culture at large (Albrecht 102). My dissertation seeks to broaden this scope and to explore specific examples of how early immigrants and the second generation—as both women and 'not quite white' Syrian/Arab

Americans—negotiated the US public sphere in a context where immigrant/oriental (and thus also Syrian) womanhoods were heavily racialized, even as simultaneously they were celebrated within Syrian ethno-nationalist discourses.

Arab Americans and US Legal Racial Classifications

The history of Arab Americans' racial status highlights the contradictory and ever shifting nature of the US racial imaginary, as well as the ambivalent position of ethnic groups that did not fit neatly into the prevalent black/white binary. The US "Open Door" immigration policies of the nineteenth century favored, even encouraged, European mass migration to fuel American labor needs. Southern plantation owners and other industries also sought to attract "coolies," poorly paid Chinese laborers that were meant to replace former slaves (Guterl; Lowe, *The Intimacies*). However, when Chinese laborers began to arrive en masse on the West Coast, the national anxieties about these 'unassimilable' kinds of Other immigrants triggered the first legal act that linked exclusion of immigrants to racial grounds: the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.[9] This act based eligibility for US citizenship on criteria of racial desirability, and initiated a proliferating process of separating racially desirable from undesired/unassimilable categories of aliens in the nation's courtrooms. The precedent of the Chinese Exclusion Act defined 'Asians' as undesirable and unfit for US citizenship, but also opened the doors for nativist desires for exclusion based on other social/racial criteria; for example, Irish immigrants struggled with significant anti-Catholic

[9] Helen Zia documents how the "Yellow Peril" movement, an anti-Chinese movement starting in the late 1870s on the West Coast, was instrumental in making this act pass. Chinese men and women were terrorized in the wake of this act, facing murder, burned homes and forced deportations. Chinese Americans began to form the first civil rights organization to fight their exclusion and exposure to racial terrorism, leading to the ruling for birth right citizenship after the American born Wong Kim Ark was barred from re-entry, appealed at the US Supreme Court and won his right to citizenship despite his Chinese heritage in 1898 (27-9).

sentiment, while Italian and Eastern European immigrants were construed as not truly white in an Anglo-Saxon/Nordic sense. Immigrants could appeal rejections, which then often meant that judges had to decide their racial status, leading to an ever-increasing array of racial sub-classifications and shades of 'whiteness.' Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects* shows how previous models of race, based on ideas of physiognomic difference and biological hierarchies, morphed into a "modern racial ideology" that "depended increasingly on the idea of complex cultural, national and physical difference" (8). The US immigration system thus proactively created hegemonic whiteness as entry criteria *and* as a transnational racial status across the globe (7-12), while the opposition to blackness continued to define white racial identity domestically.

In the early 1900s, US racial conceptions changed again. While Ngai traces how whiteness lost its explicit racial currency and slowly naturalized itself into being an unmarked, American norm for US citizenship, Matthew Guterl points to the larger cultural shifts around World War I. The simultaneous onset of US imperial ambitions and growing anti-colonialism globally pushed another approach to racial thinking, merging various non-white European ethnicities into a transcendentally, universal 'white' European category as part of a "transformation of American racial discourse into a simplistic, color-coded system" in which "White, Brown, Yellow, and Black were the four colors of a new American map of the world" (Guterl 312). Nativists remained concerned about the masses of undocumented European refugees after the War, which spurred the introduction of more restrictive immigration policies in the US, including the introduction of border checks, passports and visas. White supremacists, however, were more concerned with the perceived lack of masculine prowess in the nineteenth century constructions of Victorian manliness, based on restrained and civil behavior as hallmarks of superiority over what they deemed 'primitive' African Americans.

The shift from multiple, not-quite-white European immigrant identities toward universal American whiteness cannot be understood without paying attention to this confluence of racial and gendered anxieties at the turn of the twentieth century. Bederman argues that before 1900 white men drew on the idea "of European ancestry and the advanced civilization" (50) to claim they were superior in class and gender to black men, who were constructed as primitive, but also physically more powerful. However, white supremacist anxieties about a perceived white racial decline could no longer tolerate the idea of physically superior black masculinity, and therefore to be truly superior they had to outperform the myth of black virility they had created themselves. This emphasis on masculinity, rather than Victorian upper-class manliness, included more and different shades of working class Whites into the presumably transhistorical essence of Whiteness, increasing the (European) ethnic and class heterogeneity of the concept. Harem fantasies and belly dancing were also outlets to perform and claim this new form of masculinity and whiteness. The consumption of such shows enacted the specter of imperial superiority over the 'Orient,' which was another factor in easing domestic anxieties about the ambivalence of racial and gendered US self-perceptions in the face of growing industrialization and mass consumerism. The industrializing nation became obsessed with images of harems and Arab womanhood "as nostalgic foils for U.S. progress" (Jarmakani, *Imagining* 7). Such progress narratives and the construction of superior white American civilization, emblematically represented by the World Fair model itself, also linked Orientalisms with US ideologies of race (32).

The 1920s saw a further increase in nativist and isolationist sentiment even as the technological developments in industry eased the need for manual labor, and hence for more immigration. These combined factors then facilitated a political triumph for Nativists who were able to pass broad-scale immigration restrictions in the Johnson Reed Act of 1924. This Act

reduced immigration based on numerical limits and quotas to 3% of the already present ethnic groups in the US. Apart from the fact that it was next to impossible to define such 'national origins,' these racial boundaries for citizenship allowed more slots to Northern Europeans while limiting non-white Americans from legal representation in the quotas (Ngai, *Impossible* 33). The Act interpreted a 1920s Supreme Court ruling on the 1790 Naturalization Laws, claiming that Congress had intended citizenship only for "white persons" and "persons of African nativity and descent." All Asians —the law mentions Chinese and Japanese Americans specifically—were thus ineligible for citizenship (Ngai, "Nationalism" 13). These rulings affected new immigrants but also barred the way to citizenship for other ethnic communities already living in the United States, which found themselves in between the black/white binary. These communities included Asian-, Mexican-, and Syrian Americans.

Arab American racial ambivalence today, and Syrian Americans' racial status in the 1900s, remains intricately related to the "dual legacies of slavery and massive immigration—and how they have intersected over time" (Hatab Samhan 209). Arab Americans' racial status as 'white' or 'not-white' hinged on their perceived relation to Asianness in the first half the twentieth century (and to Islam in the latter). While conceptions of whiteness, and who was considered 'white,' change over time, Naber points out that the notion of 'unassimilability' as a marker of racial Otherness remains a central element underlying the public manifestations of anti-Arab racism throughout the twentieth century and until today. This is despite the fact that, in the 1914-15 Dow Case, early Syrian Americans achieved a legal victory that classified their ethnic group as Caucasian (19). The Syrian American community, and its intellectual center among the Mahjar group in New York, had developed sufficient muscle to take up a legal fight when the first naturalization courts began to reject Syrian applications for US citizenships based on racial

grounds in racial prerequisite cases between 1909 and 1915 (Gualtieri, "Strange" 72). The historical grounds of Arab American legal whiteness, based on these court cases, have been extensively explored (see also Naber; Suleiman "The Arab"; Majaj; Hatab Samhan; Joseph; Berman, Hassan and others). By way of summary, I will turn here to the Syrian American perspective on these cases and their racial status, exemplified by Phillip K. Hitti's and Willis Ferris' review of this dramatic phase in Syrian American history in their article on the "Syrian Naturalization Question in the United States. Certain Legal Aspects of Our Naturalization Laws," published in the February 1928 issue of *The Syrian World*.

The Syrian American community had to fight through a range of racial prerequisite court cases, and not all were successful. For example, the 1913 Shahid Case ended in a rejection of the application as Shahid himself appeared as 'too dark' and uneducated. Hitti's and Ferris' comments on Shahid reflect the ambivalence Syrian Americans felt towards their standing in US racial categories. On the one hand, they distanced themselves from Shahid, as, in their eyes, he had failed to properly represent the Syrian race and threatened to prove Syrian 'non-whiteness.' On the other hand, Hitti and Ferris very clearly sought to address the impossibility of assessing race based on 'visibility' and to reject such measures of racial identity altogether. In the end, the gist of their argument hinged on the fact that Syrians should be considered 'free white persons' in the sense of the 1790 Naturalization Laws:

> Section 2169, Revised Statutes, United States Code, Title. 8, Section 3599, which declared and still declares that the provisions of the Naturalization Act 'shall apply to aliens being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity, and to persons

> of African descent.' All others are excluded from the privilege of naturalization and thereby citizenship (3).

In their view Syrians were 'free white persons,' and not Asians by birth, as they had been admitted into the country since 1790 under this very act (7).

The legal team attempted to use the law that banned Asian immigration to prove that Syrians were not part of Asia Minor. The lower court judges never followed this reasoning, and in the next year they rejected the case of the Syrian immigrant Georg Dow. However, it appears Dow was better educated and appeared 'whiter' than Shadid, and the community put all their resources behind appealing his rejection. The legal team in the Dow Cases built their defense on the Caucasian status of Syrians as part of the Semite races, who on top of their apparent whiteness also represented the people from the Christian Holy Land. The defense, however, had to negotiate the varying understandings of race among different judges. Their first judge stated that though Dow may be a free white person, he was not the kind the Act of Congress in 1790 had in mind, being of Asiatic rather than European descent (7). Another judge contended the question of whiteness was not even at stake, as the exclusion was based on Asian heritage and not a 'discriminatory idea' of inferiority. For the Syrian legal team's defense, it was thus crucial to shift the focus away from an "Asian" category that placed Syrians alongside "Chinese, Japanese, Malays, Mongols, and American Indians" (8), and to stress Syrians' inclusion in a universal whiteness *despite* their Asian origins. They emphasized the shared religious affiliation between Syrians and Americans through Christianity, and Georg Dow won his appeal in 1915. I would add here that the timing of this decision was not a coincidence: rather, it reflects that the previously

outlined shift toward a universal sense of Euro-American whiteness during World War I could be extended to Christian Syrians specifically.

This successful legal challenge placed Syrian and Lebanese Americans on the white side of the US color line, with significant privileges in the Jim Crow South (Gualtieri, "Strange" 76). However, the legal victory and the subsequent classification of Syrian Americans as Caucasian did not lead to a stable affiliation with whiteness. As Suad Joseph put it, "There is an enduring representation of 'Arab-' as not quite American-not quite free, not quite white, not quite male, not quite persons in the civil body of the nation" (257). Due to the increasingly negative orientalist sentiments towards Arabs in the twentieth century, anti-Arab racism is more obvious in the contemporary period. After the 1967 war, anti-Arab prejudice hardened into much more explicitly racialized perceptions of Arabness, often conflated with Islam and notions of threat. Naber summarizes this development as the "process by which state discourses have transformed 'the arab' over time, from proximity to whiteness to a position of heightened Otherness" (39) by the end of the twentieth century. Both the current racialization of Islam and the historical status of Arabs in the United States as precariously situated 'honorary whites' place Syrian and Arab Americans in relation to the US black/white binary. The early legal victory of the Syrians had lasting and unforeseeable consequences for Arab Americans until today. As Arab Americans many activists experienced surveillance and discrimination, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, but being legally Caucasians they could not claim any protection or federal support without a minority status. The debates in the community during the 1990s centered on how Arab Americans were the most invisible ethnic community in the US (Kadi; Elia), while after 9/11 the hyper visibility of any association with Arabness led to intensive ethnic profiling and discrimination.

There is an ongoing debate in the field as to whether the manifold negative experiences of Arab Americans should be considered as a form of political racism (mostly targeting Arabs for being pro-Palestinian) or if it is racially and religiously motivated forms of anti-Arab racism (Naber 40-42). I build here on Nadine Naber's comprehensive introduction to *Race and Arab Americans*, which concludes that Arab American identity formations have always been framed by *both* anti-Arab racism and the privileges of racial ambiguity within the US racial classification system. Gualtieri adds that despite the contemporary racialization of Arab Americans and coalition building with other people of color, Arab Americans must also account for their historic privilege in being classified as white, with the ensuing access to citizenship privileges and property. She further notes that the current racialization of Arab Americans with regard to foreign politics and crisis has been well explored, but that the relation of early Arab Americans to other ethnic groups within the US, especially before World War II, has not ("Strange" 65).

The 1926 lynching of Nicolas Romey in Florida sheds an emblematic spotlight on the racial ambivalence of early Syrian Americans. Romey, who had been arrested after a conflict with the local police, was dragged out of police custody and shot by a white mob. The exact circumstances of the lynching are not clear, but his case demonstrates that despite their status as citizens, Syrian Americans like Romey were not 'safely' lodged on the white side of the color line. More than the lynching itself, Gualtieri argues that it was the mildly defensive reaction of the Syrian American community to this crime that reveals the racially precarious in-between situation of the community. The public at large still associated Syrians with "Asian alienness and black unworthiness" (66) despite their legal whiteness, while the community's framing of Romey's death as an unfortunate tragedy, rather than a lynching, "reveals also a history of conscious race-making on the part of Syrians; a history of defining their status as white in opposition to blacks and Asian- Americans,"

as well as "the fact that Syrians often chose a strategy of resistance to racism that reinforced exclusionary ideologies and practices" (68).

The limitations and changes in the community's access to US citizenship further underscored the racialized perceptions of Syrian religious differences. Christian Syrian Americans had won the legal cases for naturalization, but Muslim Syrians and other non-Christian and non-white Arabs had to fight for similar privileges up until the 1940s. The 1942 rejection of the Yemeni Muslim Ahmed Hassan at a naturalization court represents one of the instances where Arab proximity to whiteness could be easily revoked for Muslim Arabs (Naber 21). It was only during the 1940s that the US Census Bureau began to classify *all* Arab Americans legally on the same level as other Mediterranean immigrant groups, such as Italians or Greeks —which was in large parts due to the entry of the US into World War II. In 1944 the Arab Muslim Mohamed Mohriez won his citizenship case, the difference to Hassan's case being chiefly that the US, now at war overseas, thought to establish friendlier relations to Arab countries—in anticipation of future political needs as an emerging global power in the Middle East and to ensure access to oil resources (Bayoumi 263). Domestic perceptions of race and access to citizenship were thus also bound up with foreign policy concerns prior to 1967. Bayoumi frames the period between the 1900s and the 1940s in Arab American history as dominated by the question of access to citizenship, while Naber emphasizes that this Arab/Syrian American quest for whiteness was never entirely stable and resulted rather in a "racialization of ambiguity" (23) during these times.

Racial Ideologies and Orientalisms in US Cultural Politics

When Arab—that is, mostly Syrian-Lebanese—immigrants began arriving in the US in the 1890s and 1900s, they had to define themselves in racial terms in order to function within US

society. Not only was race a new legal category for Syrians, who would have identified by tribe or region, but it certainly remained an ambiguous one in the US at the turn of the twentieth century. As immigrants, Syrian Americans faced three major racial ideologies that dominated the US public discourse at the time: Nativism, Assimilationism and Cultural Pluralism. These three approaches emerged out of the desire to define the national self in response to European mass migration between 1880 and 1924, albeit with very different political ends.[10] Nativism, characterized by racial paranoia and eugenic fears, was a white supremacist ideology and explicitly endorsed pseudoscientific claims about the biological superiority of Anglo Saxon stock. Assimilationists, the other hand, had a different response to (European) immigration. They did not oppose immigration as long as the new arrivals assimilated into an Anglo Saxon cultural norm, also known as the 'melting pot' theory. Cultural Pluralism also welcomed immigration but shifted the focus away from assimilation to the benefits of incorporating different cultural/racial traits into the American national body (Irving 2-6). So even after Syrian Americans had officially been categorized as white American citizens in 1915, they had to redefine themselves in these racial terms between 1900 and the 1930s recent immigrants (Suleiman, *Arabs*). Syrian Americans adapted either a cultural pluralist or assimilationist approach in their ethnic self-fashioning and rejected Nativism. However, there remains much work to be done to fully understand how the representations of Syrian American womanhood intersected with and/or contradicted these US racial ideologies. As Irving points out, all of these ideologies shared that they framed immigration in terms of race *and* womanhood, including 'progressive' approaches like Cultural Pluralism. Chapter two in my dissertation explores how Syrian Americans' adaptive agency used various

[10] And they did not simply disappear after the end of open immigration in 1924 either. Rather, they have morphed and adapted over time into contemporary forms of Multiculturalism, Nativisim and White Supremacy.

elements of idealized womanhoods, associated with such racial ideologies, to carve out their position in the US racial imaginaries.

As *oriental* immigrants, Syrian Americans had to further contend with the long history of racializing US Orientalisms. Early US Orientalisms were characterized by a "particular genealogy of Asian xenophobia" *and* "deep-seated anti-Arab sentiment in the national psyche" (Schueller vii). Anxieties about the so-called 'yellow peril' were instrumental to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. US Orientalisms geared at Chinese and Japanese Americans often centered on the perceived sexual deviance of Asian men working and living on the West Coast, while the anti-Arab streak of US Orientalisms was oriented toward a transatlantic cross-fertilization of cultural anxieties about Islam, harems and colonial perceptions of Arab cultural backwardness. It is further crucial to emphasize that US Orientalisms' relationships to race and national subjecthood always linked political and cultural spheres. The US engagement in the Tripolitan War in the early 1800s lead to the foundation of the US Navy and spurred a flurry of literary output about Arab Others. Such Barbary captivity narratives developed in tandem with Native captivity narratives and collapsed images of Native American 'savages' with Muslim Arab 'savages' at the Barbary coast (Baepler 220). Malini Schueller supplements here Toni Morrison's analysis of Africanism to stress that US literatures' imagined whiteness is built on opposition to both the specter of domestic black Otherness *and* the specter of Arab Otherness overseas (9).

Despite Arab Americans' and African Americans' eventual legal claims to full citizenship, these cultural foundations of whiteness "as a standard and arbiter of national identity deposes both Arab and African Americans from citizenship and repositions them as subordinate to whites within the national narrative" (Pickens 8). While anti-Arab and anti-black racisms have their specific differences, hegemonic cultural narratives are key players in framing non-whiteness as racial

Otherness in the US. Richard Stockton's research reveals how negative stereotypes about African Americans and Jews actually share a significant amount of stock elements with anti-Arab stereotypes.[11] To account for these similarities, and without obliterating the differences in racisms, it is important to understand that racism is a "parasitic" (Irving 3) discourse. Racisms recycle elements characterizing undesirability, and Orientalism as a discourse represents a textbook case of the internal referentiality of racisms.

Edward Said's seminal analysis of *Orientalism* (1978) uncovered that Orientalism was not merely a style of philological scholarship, but also a style of thought/discourse that bolstered in turn material forms of political authority of the 'West' over the 'East.' The entanglements of these three aspects of Orientalism result in a systematic, hegemonic, discriminatory Western discourse about the 'East,' which has been, and continues to be, instrumental to 'Western' politics, histories and identities. Orientalist literary or cultural representations have very little to do with material realties on the ground in Arab nations, but they rather reflect fundamentally domestic political matters in a wide variety of Western contexts (202-04). Said's intervention has been hugely influential on humanities research, and on postcolonial studies in particular, but his narrow approach to US-specific Orientalisms, as well as Said's own implicit use of a static, male-centered East/West binary, have been central points of critique (see, for example, Schueller; Lowe, *Critical*; Jarmakani; Hassan; Berman; Salaita; Sabry). Said was mostly concerned with French and British Orientalisms, which linked colonial administration to literature, nationalisms and the emergence

[11] The currency of such stock elements, denoting racial Otherness, was not limited to nativist discourses. Prominent assimilationists, like Jacob Riis in his *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), also stereotyped Chinese, Syrian and Italian immigrants in similar terms. In his chapter "The Mixed Crowd" he describes Lower Manhattan as lacking "distinctly American" communities, being populated instead by foreigners—including "the Arab who peddles 'holy earth'" and has "his exclusive preserves at the lower end of Washington Street" (21). He does not just describe 'Little Syria' as an immigrant community, but presents it as a "dirty stain" that "soiled" (26) its surroundings.

of ‘types’ in social sciences in the nineteenth century (256), and in his view it was only after World War II that the figure of the ‘Arab’ made an entrance in US popular culture. This view ignores how Orientalisms and representations of the Middle East in popular culture, news media and art have significantly shaped US domestic and foreign policies since the early nineteenth century. Above all, women, ethnic minorities and Arab Americans themselves were not just objects, but also ambivalent agents in orientalist discourses.

The current consensus in the field is that US Orientalisms do not exist as one homogenous discourse: they are internally contradictory, ethnically ambivalent, complexly gendered, context specific, mobile, and can be appropriated for various purposes (McAlister; Lowe, *Critical*). Actual encounters between the US and the Middle East after the Barbary wars were scarce, yet precisely this lack of contact meant that the Orient offered an ideal projection screen for different kinds of imagined knowledge about the East to facilitate comparisons to the US. At first these comparisons focused on the Arab world as either a military threat or a missionary opportunity. The political opposition to Islamic (and British) despotism cast American democracy as the ultimately superior system, even as abolitionists and the temperance movement deployed comparisons to Turkish emancipation and sobriety to criticize US chattel slavery and alcohol consumption during the nineteenth century (Marr 14). These varied uses of early orientalist representations show how orientalist tropes could be used for very different political ends: for shoring up imaginative control over the Orient, but also for more subversive uses, as in the emerging forms of American transcendentalism (Schueller). Other notable antebellum examples include the Arabic slave narrative *The Life of Omar Said* (1831), which was instrumentalized by the American Colonization Society to advocate for the repatriation of African slaves to Liberia. The ACS argued that the foundations of Islamic civilization in West Africa actually would support Christian missionizing

by former slaves (Alryyes 29-32). In this case, US Orientalisms cast an Arab African slave as culturally superior due to his Islamic education and Arabic literacy—an interesting, albeit short lived, testimony to the different, context-specific manifestations of Orientalisms.

The major discursive trends in US Orientalisms center on a specific East/West stereotype that constantly translates and adapts itself: the sexualized belly dancers/oppressed Muslim women and the benevolently patriarchal sheiks/male Muslim terrorists. Its manifestations in cultural citations change with time and context, but their recognizable stock elements reappear across adaptations. For the purposes of my dissertation, it is key that the female-centered binary, the oscillation between the sexualized/oppressed (Arab) Muslim woman, represents two sides of the same coin – they are so intimately linked that one image also invokes the other. In the US this dual stereotype gained particular prominence through belly dancers, representing the oppressed/sexualized harem women, and chapter one shows how Ashea Wabe's adaptive agency engaged in the transfer of racial imaginations from US slavery to harem fantasies through this double image.

The American imagination of the 'harem' is an important element of what Timothy Marr calls "American Islamicism," that is the "domestic figuration of the foreign" (9). [12] The discursive links between slavery, harems and abolitionism were negotiated in the reception of the famous statue, "The Greek Slave," in the early 1850s. The statue of a nude, female captive in chains,

[12] Islamicism defines a specific use of Orientalism in service of the US national project in that it turns the "alien threat of Islamic difference into indigenous cultural capital that worked in complex ways to universalize American practices" (9). Marr classifies these modes as either domestic or comparative uses of Orientalisms, but with time a third mode, romantic orientalism, gained more and more popularity. Comparative Orientalisms usually depended on actual encounters with the Muslim world due to increasing trade, tourism and missions in the Ottoman Empire, but romantic orientalism was free to essentialize the oriental difference as exotic drawing heavily from translations and orientalist adaptations of the *Arabian Nights*. The *Arabian Nights* circulated already as early as 1790 in the US and were an equally important source of knowledge about Muslims as the Qur'an in US (13).

supposedly a Greek woman captured by the Ottoman empire, carried an anti-slavery message for abolitionists, but its predominant reception centered on the age-old "Euroamerican male fantasy of rescuing white female captives from the clutches of Islamic infidels" (281). Rather than evoking sympathy for the plight of black, female slaves on the US auction blocks, the statue facilitated a projection of slavery onto the Islamic realm while celebrating white, female virtue as characteristic of the nation in opposition to Muslim licentiousness (274). However, this specific US orientalist incursion could not be fixed into only one dimension. An inverse interpretation also allowed for the construction of the slaveholding US South as a domestic Orient (147), and women reformers shifted the notion of a threatening Islamic difference to an exotic and romantic appeal in the liberty of Ottoman art and dress (256). The US orientalist ambivalence toward harems could thus serve both imperialist/patriarchal as well as abolitionist and feminist causes; this ambivalence was perhaps best encapsulated by the increasing popularity of burlesque performances that lay the ground for the large-scale entry of belly dancing as the ultimate embodied expression of harem fantasies after the Chicago World Fair in 1893.

The turn of the twentieth century is commonly seen as the starting point of an exotic, commercializing US Orientalism mediated via mass culture; particularly with regard to the marketing of belly dancers at live shows and in early film recordings. Hollywood also bolstered the racializing East/West binary underlying the terms of such exotic Orientalisms, especially by contrasting a sexualized Orient to a civilized US nation-state in the movie versions of the above mentioned Euro-American harem rescue fantasies. Even if such desires could not be enacted too explicitly due to the restrictive Production Code at the time, rape-and-rescue tropes, as in the popular film *The Sheik* (1921), were integral to on-screen colonial fantasies about saving captive white women from being raped by Orientals (Naber 23-6). This is an issue to which I will return

in my analysis of Rosemary Hakim's adaptive agency in chapter four. These racialized perceptions of Arabness linked the specter of sexual threat from non-white, usually black male, bodies to notions of Muslims as fanatics who are anti-western and misogynistic, but at the same time exotic, erotic and enigmatic. While Arabness never completely collapsed into blackness, there was always a sense that "religion coupled with civilizational discourses support the construction of 'the Arab' as different from and inferior to white Americans" (Naber 26).

These intersectional relations between Arabness and blackness could also work in reverse, in forms of African American self-representation that Helen Heran Jun calls black orientalism: the "mutually exclusive critiques that unwittingly capitulated to the racialization of the Other" (3). Anna Julia Cooper, one of the black women activists mentioned in the beginning of this introduction as a speaker at the Congress at the Chicago World Fair in 1893, is a case in point. Cooper's collected essays in *A Voice from the South* (1892) address her double marginalization as a black woman, and she asserts the importance of black women's active engagement in the private and public realm for racial uplift and the fulfillment of American civilizational ideals (134-7). Part of Cooper's case, however, rests on an explicit opposition of oppressed oriental women locked away in harems and liberated black women who despite their struggles, exhibit full potential to embody American citizenship (9-12). The specter of the harem as a sexualized imagination of 'bad' Arab womanhood allowed Cooper to claim respectability and 'good' black womanhood. Syrian American women, on the other hand, sought to distance themselves from specters of black womanhood. My dissertation seeks to add another, so far understudied, perspective to these multidirectional uses of respectability politics via racial and harem references: Syrian American respectability politics as a form of adaptive agency that performed a disavowal of racial ambivalence while practicing at least a strategic affinity to black respectability politics.

Throughout my case studies I point to moments of potential relations between African American respectability politics in juxtaposition to *and* correspondence with early Syrian American women's self-organizing and public self-representations. African American respectability politics was disseminated through "Black women's clubs, fraternal and civic organizations, black colleges, artists and writers, churches and members of the black business community weighed in on appropriate routes to social inclusion and cultural acceptance" (Higginbotham 193). Within Syrian American communities, the Arab press, societal organizations and elite members of intellectual and/or business communities operated in a similar fashion. Thesefigures promoted an idealized vision of Syrianness and functioned as gatekeepers by keeping in check the undesirable or rebellious voices of Syrian American women who did not adhere to the communities' vision of Syrian and American respectability. Chapter one looks at visual affinities in African and Syrian American women's embodied self-representation via photography as a strategy to refute the stigma of 'dysfunctional'—and thus racialized/unassimilable—families. Chapter two turns to the negotiations of idealized Syrian American womanhood between Broadway producers and Syrian American journalism in the 1920s, while chapter three examines the Syrian Ladies Aid Association in the context of proliferating women's clubs. Finally, chapter four, documents a significant shift in Syrian-Lebanese American women's self-representation in the 1950s, when Rosemary Hakim moves away from adapting codes of respectability as a means of fighting stigma toward proudly embodying new imaginations of sexually desirable white womanhood.

My final chapter also offers new scholarship on the 1950s as a sorely understudied period in Arab American history. The internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor during the 1940s and the excessive focus in US Orientalisms on Japanese Americans meant that Chinese and Arab

Americans experienced a period of comparatively positive US attitudes toward them in the 1950s (McAlister 40-2). I explore how the Lebanese American beauty queen Rosemary Hakim was able to utilize this historic moment to claim her vision of Arab American womanhood on an international stage, at a time when the US also thought to position itself as a benevolent imperial power in the Middle East—taking control from the British and containing communist influences through cultural diplomacy. Hakim's narrative self-representation in her memoir, far from just being an 'apolitical' love story, also foreshadows the orientalist-racializing terms that would return US attention to Arabs as enemies abroad and suspicious 'foreign' elements within during subsequent decades. The 1973 Oil Shock (which was perceived as an attack on domestic US 'families' and needs), the escalating Israel-Palestine conflict and the 1979 Iranian Hostage crisis in 1979 went hand in hand with the emerging rhetoric of the US leading a 'war on terror' even before the 1990s Gulf Wars and the post-9/11 wars (Zaretsky; McAlister).

In light of these intersections between racial imaginaries and political contexts, Fadda-Conrey argues that for Arab-Americans there was/is little room to negotiate cultural citizenship outside of inclusion and assimilation, branded as forever foreign in the US. She then posits that contemporary Arab American literature, in its transnational articulations of belonging, offers a cultural space to challenge this imperative of assimilation: "by focusing in their work on complex and transnational engagements with the self-same constructs that Otherize them in the eyes of a US public" authors can "revise hegemonic and imaginary configurations of racial, ethnic, religious, national, political, and gendered identities. In doing so, they challenge and push against the limits of purportedly inclusive structures of US citizenship" (5). My methodological approach departs from similar premises: With adaptive agency I look at archival traces to analyze the

trans/national articulations of belonging in the cultural histories of Arab American women's self-representation and their relationships to US racial imaginaries.

Methodology and Theoretical Foundations

Contemporary Arab American women activists often resort to literature and scholar-activism to fight anti-Arab racism on the one hand, as well as the double bind of American sexism and Arab patriarchies on the other. While Arab American literature remains at the margins of US publishing industries, women writers have dominated its development since the 1980s—both in feminist novelistic traditions as well as within the memoir boom, often as native informants who sell narratives of Muslim women's victimhood. This tension between fighting and utilizing stereotypes frames scholarly debates about the contemporary literary stakes in Arab American self-representation. Steven Salaita notes that:

> popular images of Arabs in the United States influence perceptions of the Arab American community; and how, in turn, these perceptions are either contradicted or re-imagined by Arab American writers who explore the complex positioning of the Arab in American society and therefore offer examples of fiction that liberate Arab America from the limitations of established perception (109).

The importance of relationships between popular images and Arab American cultural production reach far back to the beginning of Arab migration to the US. The public traces and cultural agency of Arab American women between the 1890s and 1960s, prior to their prominence in publishing

industries, are much harder to trace, but adaptive agency offers a methodological approach for this kind of analysis.

Why Adaptive Agency?

Arab Americans' use of hegemonic tropes in cultural productions and different modes of self-representation has been analyzed as a form of Self/auto-Orientalism. Christina Civantos has shown that Arab Argentine authors use what she calls auto-Orientalism to write themselves into national subjecthood (22). In the US context, Waïl Hassan surveys the use of orientalist stereotypes among Mahjar writers in the early US-based Arab American literature as a form of cross-cultural translation (16-21), while Jacob Berman traces how the figure of the Arab, as an aestheticized 'arabesque' translation of Arabness into American culture, shaped both national subjecthood and offered early Syrian Americans a resource for self-representation to claim proximity to whiteness (17-9). Matthew Stiffler's research on "Self-Orientalism" (111) in the public outreach of the Antiochian church and other Christian Arab American communities documents that Arab American communities used references to orientalist narratives and images—most frequently, tropes and motives from the *Arabian Nights*—to promote their businesses, churches and food festivals to the wider American public. Adaptations of orientalist tropes have thus always exceeded the strictly literary realm, shaping cultural and political forms of self-representation as well.

My use of adaptive agency builds upon this research and includes Self-Orientalisms as means to access US public spheres. However, the archival traces of early Arab American women's adaptive agency in photography, performance, journalism, the club movement and beauty pageants engage in many gendered, racial ideologies beyond Orientalism. I argue that adaptation, rather than cultural translation, is a more precise framework to analyze this multiplicity in Arab and Syrian American women's self-representation. For example, Rosemary Hakim's use of the sexual

allure of virile desert sheik figures in her memoir *Arabian Antipodes* adapts tropes popularized nationally in the 1920s Hollywood adaptations of *The Sheik* to position herself as the white/Anglo, and yet Lebanese American, heroine. These references to orientalist tropes were *not* presented as a translation or import directly from the 'East,' but in their recognizable referentiality to already established US orientalist tropes they function as adaptations. I am not positing hard and fast boundaries between cross-cultural translations and adaptations, but a shift in emphasis to adaptation allows a more nuanced analysis of how Arab American women, as 'authors' of their public self-representation, drew on both orientalist tropes and other recognizable stock elements from the US racial imaginary—mostly, but not only, ideals of white middle-class womanhood.

Formally an adaptation may involve a shift of medium, mode, frame, context or ontology from real to fictional (Hutcheon 7). The agency of the adaptor is central to an analysis of such cultural products in both their diachronic and synchronic relationalities. First, cross-cultural adaptations change the meaning of the adapted elements in conjunction with the work's reception in a new context. However, in addition to these contextual changes, the individual agency of authors/cultural agents who adapt established narratives allows them also to "pick and choose" (150) what to include in their representations. The adaptors are thus a nexus between "intricate sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts as well as idiosyncratic motivations for creating a work that relocates a narrative" (Balestrini 13/9). I transfer this framework of adaptations in cultural productions to an analysis of individual self-representation, which opens up an analytical space to account for the individual possibilities to 'curate' an image of oneself to the public sphere—especially for immigrant women who face racializing stereotypes disseminated by hegemonic, cultural productions.

Hutcheon explores the racial implications of authorial agency in adaptations most closely when she looks at travelling adaptions as encounters and processes of 'indigenization'—Hutcheon's adaptation of Susan Friedman's term—which refers to situations where "Local particularities become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results" (150). Hutcheon applies this view to her conceptualization of adaptations as processes. In such travelling adaptations, power differentials between colonizers and colonized (and racial and gender categories) influence who can access such nodes in transnational knowledge flows. Hutcheon reflects on the importance of the political/personal location of postcolonial adapters for the process and its product as "willful reinterpretations for a different context" (153). She looks at a concrete case of how a modern re-reading of unacceptable pasts can alter political terms: a feminist adaptation of a misogynistic play like *Carmen* may actually break silences of sexual and physical abuse via adaptation as "repetition without replication" (149). However, when it comes to the role of race and ethnicity in transcultural adaptations of *Carmen*, Hutcheon remains vague. She looks at the differences in production and reception depending on whether Carmen is cast as a 'gypsy' or not, but how would a Roma woman writer adapt *Carmen* herself? Adaptive agency as an analytical approach pays attention to how authors/agents, writing from within stereotypes, use and contest the hegemonic terms that seek to exclude them.

My methodology also responds to Gualtieri's call to analyze ethnic Arab American histories not just as stories of assimilation—or in my case, as submission to gendered stereotypes—but as a conscious/agentive managing of assimilation via a process of selective adaptation. In *Between Arab and White* Gualtieri analyzes how the process of Syrian American ethnic identity formation continually interlaced daily life with politics: "They thus became involved in a process of selection, adaptation, and acculturation, and in each case new self-understandings developed

out of the interplay between homeland and migratory identities" (14). Gualtieri focuses on how Syrian American ethnic identity emerged out of a collective immigrant experience. Building on her insights, I seek to expand upon her work by looking in more detail at the role of gender, and the intersections of race and gender, in these processes.

Agency, Affect and Politics

My approach also requires a careful consideration of the meaning of agency. Conceptions of agency vary widely between different fields and disciplines, including "changing the terms of one's social relations, as an oppositional tactic of resistance, as self-empowerment, as public visibility and participation" (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 55). I situate my use of adaptive agency in the realms of visibility and participation, but with a more nuanced approach to political impact. Transnational feminist critics, in particularly Saba Mahmood in her ethnographic study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement in *Politics of Piety*, have challenged the common Western liberal feminist expectation that only resistance to hegemonic discourses counts as agency. Mahmood is invested in recasting the concept of agency as more than just a mode of resistance and subversion of representations (10). Her study of conservative Muslim women's performances of piety, for example as religious leaders in local communities in Cairo, asserts that one can't simply dismiss their agency as submission; their politics of piety do not challenge religious norms, but they utilize the accepted space for negotiation that piety awards them within the system. While Mahmood only focuses on religious practices, Serene Khater's conceptualization of women's adaptive preferences theorizes how such 'non-progressive' agency can be an essential element of how women manage life within patriarchy. Women's actions may support patriarchal systems to increase their individual well-being, but nevertheless display agency in their "active reflection

about norms and options" (313) in doing so. Ultimately, such adaptive preferences are not fixed, but would change if women's opportunities were to improve as well.

I believe it is crucial that we bring such a 'functional' understanding of agency to the history of women's self-representation within Arab American studies as well. Adaptive agency combines this view of agency with a cultural analysis of adaptation to uncover new facets of Arab American women's histories that would remain invisible if we searched for activist legacies only. Current studies on Self-Orientalisms often frame adaptation of orientalist stereotypes as submission to self-oppression/self-marketing or 'mimicry.' For example, in his analysis of cultural translations by early Arab American writers, Hassan distinguishes between "transgressive cultural translation" and "chameleon-like-adaptation," stating "that while the former had the potential to interrogate and unsettle discursive and ideological presuppositions, the latter adheres to, and in effect confirms and legitimates, the reigning discourses" (Hassan 68). While I do not dispute the validity of his particular analysis, the value judgment placed on 'chameleon-like' adaptations leads to an emphasis on certain kinds of research areas over others.

Hassan and Steven Salaita stress that in our current anti-Arab and Islamophobic climate it is imperative to call out native informant writers—such as Norma Khouri's infamous hoax autobiography *Honor Lost* (2003). Khouri literally sells 'authentic' representations of the orientalist stereotypes Western audiences crave for her personal gain.[13] In its extremity, it is easy to dismiss this memoir as a singular case. Salaita even goes so far as to call on fellow scholars to

[13] Amal Amireh and Lisa Suahir Majaj analyze the impact of the reception environment on the production, aesthetics and politics of 'Third world' women writers. Within Western feminist and multi-ethnic literary markets the mere visibility of a few highly canonized multi-ethnic texts, often used as 'windows' into other cultures, obscures the highly selective and mediated process of what gets published where. Majority audience expectations confine minority voices to predefined spaces, which in conjunction with orientalist stereotypes and contemporary political US interests limits especially Arab American women authors to the role of native informants that confirm Western superiority over 'oppressive' Muslim traditions (1-27).

not ‘waste time’ on an analysis that demystifies such auto-orientalist memoirs and to rather work on demystifying Orientalism itself (108). Hassan takes up Salaita’s point, but emphasizes that *Honor Lost*, a narrative dependent entirely on its ‘truths’ being already accepted as such by Western audiences before the text was even written, represents only one end of a polarity between domesticating or foreignizing self-representation (36). While most of Arab American cultural production emerges somewhere in-between these two poles, the embedded progressive/non-progressive binary limits our perspective on which kinds of material deserve our attention. This is especially germane to this dissertation’s historical analysis about women’s cultural traces that may adapt some orientalist tropes for personal benefits, but in different ways than the native informant memoirs of the contemporary publishing industries.

Hassan’s research moves the field toward a more nuanced understanding of how both Orientalisms *and* US racial ideologies enable and limit Arab American cultural production. He highlights that self-orientalizing positions, as cultural translations from East to West, did not just reproduce stereotypes, but also offered an ambivalent form of public agency by “contesting the identity assigned by the dominant majority discourse while at the same time utilizing its sanctioned narrative procedures to enter into its regime of truth” (80). However, as Marylin Booth points out, Hassan pays too little attention to the role of gender within these processes (282). Another by-product of this approach is that supposedly ‘less interesting’ forms of Arab American cultural expression, such as women’s quotidian acts of self-representation—geared at managing life as oriental immigrants in the US, and not at outright challenging orientalist stereotypes —have so far been understudied.

My dissertation shows that the adaptation of already circulating images and narratives of *both* imagined Arab and American womanhoods gave early Arab American women a form of

agency that did not necessarily engage in explicitly 'liberating' them from stereotypes, but in managing their ethnic and gendered ambivalence. While I do not want to preclude possible, political impact by early Arab American women in adapting and 're-imaging' popular images of Arabness, and of American womanhoods, this is not the primary category of analysis in my dissertation. Adaptive agency focuses on easily over-looked bodily, narrative and visual archival traces of how hegemonic tropes interpellated women's lived experiences within patriarchies and racializing Orientalisms. In cultural terms, this also means women do not just adopt or adapt *to* stereotypes, but that they claim agency through selective adaptation of which frames best suited their sense of being Arab and American women. Such adaptive agency usually did not set out to challenge existing racial hierarchies but could end up doing so inadvertently. I suggest reading Arab American women's adaptations of orientalist, and other, stereotypes not as a submission, but as a form of active reflection on racial and gender norms, as well as on the restrictive demands for assimilation and community formation placed on them.

Even without expressed political intentions, there is political impact—at the very least on an affective level—by the material and discursive presence of 'oriental' women as agents in orientalist tropes (which in turn are driving forces of Arab American racial ambivalence). As Said himself pointed out: "the Orientalist's present is enabled by the Orient's effective absence" (208). Said's foundational conceptualization of Orientalism has drawn harsh criticism for failing to address the role of oriental Orientalists and the mutual influence between Western and Eastern Orientalists in detail (Habib; Hamdi). The critique applies in particular to Said's construction of "the West," and the US, as a homogenous category, since orientalist discourses have played a major role in co-creating race, American subjectivity and citizenship. Despite many valid points in the critique of Said's work, it is nevertheless instructive to return to Said's original text as his

basic definitions of Orientalism already include references to the individual agency of authors that at the very least invite an analysis that includes Arab Americans as both objects and subjects of Orientalisms. Said asserts that Orientalism as a discourse is "by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power" (12).

Said's work far precedes the transnational turn in American Studies, but *Orientalism* anticipates many of our current frameworks on transnational circulations that invariably intersect with the constructions of US nationalism and nationhood.[14] For example, Inderpal Grewal's foundational work on 'America' as a simultaneously national and transnational formation analyses the production of gendered and racialized bodies and subjects within 'transnational connectivities'. She introduces this term to better grasp how flows and exchanges of knowledge, ideas and people function across asymmetrical power relations. For her, the term 'global' is misleading in its false universalism. The 'transnational' is a more accurate term to gauge scale and variability of connections that have come to be subsumed as "globalization" (Grewal 22), and speaks to Said's "uneven exchange with various kinds of power." For Said, both individuals and institutions can be agents in these exchanges, and while his work is more interested in the surfaces and superstructures of imperial knowledge production, the politics of authorial agency frame his considerations (13). Said emphasizes the inevitably political nature of authorship, as texts are always shaped by their

[14] A transnational framework reconceptualizes America as a multidirectional exchange of people, ideas, and goods; it deterritorializes literatures and languages, and reconsiders questions about identities, spaces and origins (see Fisher Fishkin; Jay; Giles; Grewal). The 'transnational' in itself is an inherently ambiguous and malleable analytical category that can lend itself equally to supporting hegemonic discourses like Orientalisms, or other harmful aspects of globalization, as well as toward critiquing these dominant histories. In my use of the transnational I follow Laura Briggs' suggestion to theorize the transnational as a category of analysis in analogy to (and in my methodology in tandem with) gender to make alternative histories visible (637).

contexts and other intertextualities: "the relationship between texts and groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large" (20). Orientalisms as citational systems rely on internal references that perpetuate embedded East/West value hierarchies. However, it is then also precisely their reliance on cultural translation and cross-cultural adaptations that offers individual authors, in Said's terms, a strategic location (or in Grewal's terms, access to a transnational connectivity[15]) to work with and potentially shape how Orientalisms manifest themselves in a given context.

For the Arab and Syrian American women in my case studies, it is their bodies—their material bodies and their 'mirroring' bodies (Juncker 63), how they reflect the dominant discourses projected unto them of their surroundings—that place them in such a transnational, strategic authorial location. They have to manage lived experiences of racial ambivalence in daily life as well as engage with larger, discursive arguments as journalists or represent Syrian-Lebanese American womanhood publicly in women's clubs or as beauty queens. In all of these instances performative or narrative adaptive agency, directly or indirectly, positions these women in relation to orientalist reference frames. As 'oriental' women physically present in the US, as citizens that celebrate Arab heritage or even as white, respectable Syrian Ladies the recognizable adaptation or disavowal of an oriental trope dis-orients, in Sarah Ahmed's terms, the affective directions of white supremacy. I suggest turning to Ahmed's view on how affect works within the establishment of

[15] Such connectivities become visible in geopolitically specifically located nodes in a network of travelling discourses. These nodes enable transnational connectivities, but also control where which forms of knowledge travel, who or what accesses the network or what is made accessible (Grewal 1 - 27). This assessment aptly describes also the specific transnational connectivity of 'contemporary US Orientalism' and the histories of colonial and imperial power intersecting within contemporary hegemonic discourses (Schueller).

hegemonic norms to re-evaluate early Arab Americans' relations to white privilege in their self-representation, rather than dismissing them as co-optation.

In *Queer Phenomenologies* Ahmed defines whiteness as an effect of the ease with which bodies can extend their reach, and as the ability of the self to be the invisible center of a set of shared objects. Ahmed theorizes this hegemonic process of shaping orientations of and toward objects as a relationship that appears as a line (119). Her conception of 'lines' invokes a spatial metaphor to represent phenomenologically the continuity of empire; the way we perceive dominant narratives as an unbroken chain of events, which quite literally 'affects' how audiences perceive whiteness as normal. Ahmed defines the power exerted through affect then as the feeling of being 'in line' with norms vs being 'out of place' (*Queer* 15). The act of orienting oneself around an object is thus not a neutral act. Ahmed's queer phenomenology moves here from Benedict Anderson's analysis of how an imagined community is able to form around print culture as a shared object to Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism, the orientation of the West around the Orient as its object in multiple media and discourses. The notion of lines also includes the movement and circulation of objects, which in the case of Orientalism is a set of texts, paintings and stereotypes that are circulated as shared objects and create social communities as much as geopolitical lines: "By being directed toward the Orient, we are orientated 'around' the Occident. Or, to be more precise, *the Occident coheres as that which we are organized around through the very direction of our gaze toward the Orient*" (116, emphasis mine). Power and normativity, also with regard to race and sexuality, thus operate in the perceived straightening of these circulations into lines.

Ahmed introduces here a new perspective on how to resist this normative power of affect: the possibility of dis-orientation when such lines are interrupted by queerness (instead of straight lines) to allow for alternative realities. In her essay "Happy Objects" Ahmed thinks through figures

of ‘affect aliens’ (that is anyone unwilling to reproduce normative lines, such as the famous stereotype of the feminist killjoy, unhappy queers or melancholic migrants) to unveil the epistemic violence and normative work that goes into the straightening of lines. In stabilizing their own proximity to whiteness Arab American women’s adaptive agency engages in this normative work as well. Auto-Orientalisms collaborate to some degree with placing Arab Americans ‘in line’ with Orientalisms, as they keep centered around the Orient as a “supply point” (*Queer* 114) for objects/tropes. However, at the same time, Arab American women’s auto-orientalist adaptive agency in a US context can dis-orient the very lines they may seek to straighten, especially in combination with adaptation of American tropes of womanhood. Some adaptive choices break with orientalist stereotypes altogether, but for the most part Arab American women are not affect aliens. Rather, auto-orientalist gestures in Arab American women’s self-representation perform a positive re-valuation of Arabness. This does not intentionally dis-orient white supremacy, but *re-orients* orientalist lines that seek to distance Arab racial and sexual Otherness from American norms on a foundational level.

Finally, auto-Orientalisms rarely appear alone. The “multiplicity of ideologies through which the subject is hailed” (Watson and Smith, *Reading* 56) is foundational to any understanding of how cultural scripts impact people’s self-representation. Adaptive agency analyses the relationality between discourses and embodied experiences that shapes how race and gender impact Arab American women’s possibilities for self-representation—in Orientalisms, the US black/white binary, and racially exclusionary ideals of national womanhood. In terms of affective politics, this intersectional multiplicity makes it impossible for Arab American women to establish themselves in relation to the usually invisible lines of Anglo American hegemony, even if they

explicitly seek to assimilate. On its flipside, women's adaptive agency then re-orients affective values of Arab Americanness even if the intended direction is not always clear.

Adaptive Modalities and the Archive

All forms of adaptation function within a relationship between "authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response" (Hutcheon 111), which always already blurs boundaries between the political and the textual and, via adaptive agency, the personal in embodied experience. Adaptations may materialize in different modes, or what Hutcheon broadly defines as modes of engagement. Adaptive modes of engagement must acknowledge, to some degree, that they are adapting prior sources, but such modes need not only be narrative (the telling mode) to qualify as an adaptation. Hutcheon also sees processes of adaptation in the showing mode (visual adaptations) and in interacting modes (Hutcheon talks here about computer games) (10). I argue that since adaptation as a process incorporates both the formal and the experiential, it can work through embodied performances, especially in adapting recognizable racial and gendered tropes too.

As a theory, adaptation then offers a useful umbrella, or touchstone, for the different materials and media in my case studies. My specific focus on women's personal or organizational interaction with hegemonic tropes further supports this trans-mediality. Adaptive agency appears in narrative forms of self-representation, such as life writing, as well as in embodied forms of self-representation in photography (visual) or performative modes (interactive). For example, Ashea Wabe's performance of harem fantasies represents an embodied, concrete manifestation of tropes that already circulated in literature and painting. Her court appearance adapts and shapes performative harem scenarios. When Edna K. Saloomey publishes advice columns in *The Syrian World* on how best to behave as a Syrian American woman, she adapts already circulating tropes

of (white) women's respectability that are and have been mediated through family photography, black women's novels or political pamphlets. In all these cases, self-representation is an intersubjective process "aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 16) between the adaptor and her audiences. In light of the limited archival material available that would reveal more details about Arab American women's lives, tracing such acts of self-representation through dominant tropes reveals a great deal about women's active negotiation of Arab American racial ambivalence. Methodologically, focusing on the process of adaptation itself, rather than different genres, allows me to bring such a diverse array of media and sources into conversation with each other.

Before adaptive agency can materialize as a specific node in intersubjective processes of self-representation, Arab and Syrian American immigrant communities need to exercise a different kind of agency: the consumption of mass media, that is, the ability/opportunity to consume media that circulated hegemonic tropes of race and womanhood in the US. Arjuan Appadurai argues in *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* that the consumption of globalized mass media gives migrant communities a specific form of cultural agency they did not have before the advent of electronically disseminated mass media in the 1980s. There are certainly differences in the degrees of exposure and consumption, but I argue that the early 1900s, with the advent of cinema and print mass media, would have offered to immigrants a similar opportunity to consume and know about hegemonic tropes that regulated who could access Americanness (culturally and legally). Further, the transnational circulation of specifically orientalist stereotypes was so dominant across literature, political discourse and the arts that incoming Arab and Syrian Americans, particularly with a middle-class educational background, would have likely been familiar with these tropes as well. The deployment of the Holy Land trope in the Syrian American

racial prerequisite court cases is a case in point. Public representatives of the Syrian American community were able to see and respond to the entanglements of US racial imaginaries with Orientalisms through adaptive agency, and this dissertation is a first step toward recovering the role of women in this process.[16]

On the other end of adaptive agency as an intersubjective process, there needs to be an audience—or, at least, an implied reader/viewer who would be able to recognize and understand the selection and adaptation of the given hegemonic tropes and racial/gendered norms. Arab American women's adaptive agency, as a product and an ongoing process, often revolves around the body and performative acts of embodiment to engage in public spheres and knowledge transfer between local Syrian American and national ideals of womanhood. Male intellectual elites had access to publishing industries, but for most women public, cultural agency—and its archival legacies—materialized through their own bodies: their material presence as a focal point for media that facilitated public outreach (e.g. performance or photography), as well as the ways perceptions of bodies reflected and modulated dominant discourses of womanhood, national belonging and racial status.

Therí Pickens argues that such body politics—the fundamental sameness of bodies and the ways corporality interacts with political and social discourses—links Arab and African American experiences and cultural expressions. She applies body politics as an analytical lens to contemporary African and Arab American literature, uncovering how embodied experiences, a shared fragility due to the wear and tear of being an agent and acted upon between African and Arab Americans, are the foundation to articulate a comparative anti-racist critique. Inhabiting an

[16] More research in this area should be done on the possibilities of such adaptive agency for working-class Syrian Americans. I was not able to do so within the scope of this dissertation, but I hope that developing the theoretical framework for such an analysis with middle-class case studies will allow for a more expansive focus in future work.

Arab or African American body places women from both communities under the imperative to "write or be written" (3) in the context of US white supremacy. Pickens places here the legacies of 1980s women of color feminisms into a conversation with contemporary Arab American feminist literature. She examines how narratives are always connected to the context in which they comment *and* to the body that creates them (14). These links between the material and the discursive, the power hierarchies that shape intersections of the embodied practices of daily life and hegemonic stereotypes, apply to adaptive agency in self-representation as well. Rather than asking if such embodied practices challenge stereotypes, Pickens focuses on the conversations bodily traces in narratives enable. This approach is equally important in my study of archival traces of early Arab American women and the potential affinities with African American women's struggles for self-representation. However, rather than focusing primarily on narrative authorial agency, the available archival trace of Arab American women's interaction with different kinds of audiences require a turn to the intersections of self-representation with performance studies.

Adaptive agency, as a strategic referential process within self-representation, links adaptation as a cultural practice to alternative forms of knowledge transfer via individual, embodied performances. Diane Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* unpacks how the form of the archive limits what we can know. Performances are live, ephemeral events that need to be experienced and any form of documentation—that is, an archive broadly defined —represents only a copy of the original, past performance. Written texts or documents can never replace the embodied experience of participating in a live event. Arab American women's adaptive agency via embodied practices thus may easily be lost; without archival record there is also no 'audience,' or scholarly reception, past their immediate contexts. Taylor, however, shows that there is an alternative form of knowledge

transfer through the repertoire: a cultural, non-archival system of knowledge transfer that relies on repeated, embodied performances that may solidify into scenarios. While traces of performances rarely enter *written* archives, photographs (and later film) and descriptions of performative encounters in media register certain features of a performance in setting, tone, clothes or gestures. As in the process of adaptation, if such patterns become recognizable and traceable across different performative instances, they can solidify into what Taylor calls a scenario, "meaning-making paradigms" (28) that transfer knowledge through repeated, embodied acts. A scenario offers an analytical bridge between the archive and the repertoire, and lends itself to deciphering traces of adaptive agency in past, embodied forms of self-representation by early Arab American women.

Finally, adaptive agency as an intersubjective, performative process raises questions about subjectivity. The possibility to adapt potentially harmful or oppressive tropes as a "repetition without replication" within the process of adaptation is crucial (Hutcheon 149) and links adaptation studies to Taylor's notion of the repertoire, as well as to Judith Butler's conception of individual gender performativity. One of the key features of any performance is that they are never purely a repetition, but always 'once again.' Through this "once-againness" (Taylor 32) the meaning of a cultural self-representation, either in narrative adaptations or embodied practices, changes—either consciously as a willful re-interpretation or, in the case of most gender performativity, unconsciously. Butler posits in her foundational work on gender performativity that gender norms are created unconsciously through repeated performances in personal, embodied practices. Such repetitions are compulsory and subconscious in their imitation of gendered norms, but also parodic as they are repetitions of repetitions. Adaptive agency occupies a middle ground here, as it requires a degree of individual awareness, even if the adaptation of, for example, elements of white, middle-class womanhood may not always be fully conscious. While gender performativity usually works

subconsciously, adaptive agency straddles the lines of the private/individual and public/discursive realms. Put differently, my analysis looks at how adaptive agency in Arab American women's self-representation mediates between personal gender performativity and formally published cultural productions, such as plays or novels, or national discourses. This specific analytical angle responds to the kind of semi-public traces Arab American women left behind in the archive.

Arab American women's public legacies are disproportionally affected by the disappearance of knowledge outside, and even within, written archives. Part of the problem why the cultural history of early Arab American women's public agency is so hard to trace is a lack in archival material, but another part is the disregard of these kinds of knowledge hidden in the existing collections. Jessica Bier's forthcoming research on the labor history of Arab and Syrian American women in the early twentieth century literally and conceptually maps out the role of archives in forgetting/remembering women's roles in these histories. Bier notes that despite the significant role of Arab American women in these histories (for example, women were even preferred as peddlers and factory employees), their presence registers mostly through their conspicuous absence in the archives of Arab American labor history (9). While contextual historical sources indicate that there should have been a significant amount of material on Arab American women's labor history, the actual documents left behind by the community censor these public traces for a variety of reasons. For example, women peddlers were frequently excluded from archival material to dissociate Syrian women from the stigma of working in public. Women's prominent role in journalism and business allowed them to appear and be named in these archives, but then their actual contributions are erased at the level of content. Bier thus calls on researchers to heed "how three key aspects of the records—namely, their form, content, and context—are produced through changing relations of power" (3). The materiality of archives is literally produced in conjunction

with power dynamics of the time. This also affects how (and if) the traces of public self-representation among early Arab American women were registered. Adaptive agency as an analytical lens can mitigate such archival limitations to some degree because its focus on citation, repetition and variation offers ways of deciphering individual cultural agency hidden behind hegemonic discourses or other aspects of Arab American life deemed worthier of record.

My methodology builds on Bier's insights and works with the power relations that determine women's absences and presences in the Arab American archive. In doing so, I shift my attention from labor history to cultural representations. As outlined above, Arab American racial ambivalence is intricately linked to the cultural sphere. I argue that women's adaptive agency, as a semi-conscious incorporation of different elements of imagined womanhoods into lived experiences, was a central element of negotiating US racial hierarchies. This entanglement of material and discursive factors enables the kind of analytical work I suggest adaptive agency can do. Adaptive agency may not provide a full picture of Arab American women's lives, but it does reveal how individual women envisioned Arab, Syrian or Lebanese American womanhood in their specific locations. Moreover, even if adaptive agency often was not a conscious political act, it could offer women a mode of alternative knowledge transfer and a stage to engage with larger audiences, possibly impacting and re-orienting the affective values attached to 'Arab American' womanhood.

Location in the Field

My case studies on adaptive agency in Arab American women's self-representation link postcolonial and ethnic studies perspectives, in particular with regard to questions of authenticity and agency. In postcolonial studies the question of agency, especially of subaltern women's

'unknowable' voices, was seminally encapsulated by Gayatri Spivak's essay on "Can the subaltern speak?" Karen Vallgårda argues that, if historical research into women's traces of agency is not to replicate colonial and patriarchal power structures that produce such subaltern positions, the central lesson to take from Spivak is the impossibility of authenticity (475). In a US context, people of color face historically entrenched, intersectional forms of oppression that also threaten to severely limit or very narrowly define accepted paths to access the public sphere. African American studies and literatures have a long history of examining the impact and relationships between discursive racial performances and material, embodied experiences of 'blackness' for individual subjects.[17] Also here authenticity is impossible, yet constantly at stake. Blackness, just like Arabness, remains an "elusive signifier" (Johnson, E. 2)—often contradictory, celebratory and limiting, and frequently assessed upon arbitrary criteria of authenticity in racial performances. Identity and cultural performances thus remain focal points for the production of 'black' culture as a constant process of avowing/disavowing its 'essence,' resulting in complicated dynamics of appropriation as well as historical continuities in stabilizing white supremacy through racial performances (3).

Looking toward cross-fertilization between postcolonial and ethnic/critical race studies, E. Patrick Johnson relates African American racial performances to instances where "the colonized have made use of the colonizer's forms as an act of resistance" (6)—not unlike strategic uses of auto-Orientalisms by Arab Americans. He emphasizes that the trope of 'performance' itself enables appropriation, but also offers a site for multiple performances of blackness. Ultimately, the embodied, material experiences of race grate against performances of authenticity, but in their

[17] Paradigmatic examples of resistance to the idea of 'racial authenticity' would be novels like Johnson Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* or George Schuyler's *Black No More* provocatively subverts both white supremacist views of biological race as well as black elite efforts to reclaim a positive, black cultural essence.

performative relationship lies a potential for cultural agency. My approach to adaptive agency connects African American and Arab American struggles for self-representations not on a level of equivalence in the oppressions and limitations they face, but in the paradox that they often have to perform ethnic authenticity as imagined by the wider public to access public spheres or audiences. Yet, as argued in my methodology, any adaptation of such imagined authenticity changes its meaning in a new context, and as authors/agents Arab Americans are not subaltern/voiceless; they can mix and merge different elements into a new subject position.

Foundational postcolonial and cultural studies theorists have proposed different approaches to how minor authors and cultural agents can work with or transcend this paradox, such as Homi Bhabha's vision of hybridity and third space, Spivak' s strategic essentialism and deconstructive intervention into sign chains, or Stuart Hall's approach to (re-)articulation. The theory of adaptation, and by extension adaptive agency, offers here a shift in emphasis from ethnic self-representation as a mode of resistance to a refutation of the authentic/inauthentic binary itself. Hutcheon's main interest in her theory of adaptation is to explore the paradox of how adaptations are so reviled, looked down upon as secondary and derivative, even while they have been and continue to be extremely popular. She refutes a hierarchization between original and 'derivatives' and advances a case for theorizing adaptions as cultural productions in their own right. I propose a similar approach to ethnic and gendered self-representations. Adaptive agency is not a derivative but a performative reflection on normative imaginaries that offers a historical lens into the ambivalent cultural agency afforded by gendered and racial performances in a specific context.

Pressing questions about agency, race and self-representation continue until today, especially with the advent of neoliberal multicultural co-optation of discourses of hybridity and global feminism since the 1980s (Melamed). More recent scholarly work has shifted the terms of

the debate from hybridity to relationality. On a basic level, relationality rethinks the relationships between Theory and empirical realities in new ways. In the fields of ethnic and literary studies, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call such relational approaches "creolization" (3), a merging of the study of theories and literatures that acknowledges the entanglement of knowledge production and its subjects/objects, rather than recreating stifling binaries. Similar interventions can also be found in other theoretical frames that cut across a range of humanities disciplines, such as Édouard Glissant's approach to relationality (identities as inherently relational), Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (a holistic perspective on how forms of oppression interact) and Michael Rothberg's multidirectionality (how responses to trauma / oppression connect beyond their immediate context). Lionnet and Shih see ethnic studies, such as Chicano, African American, Latinx, and Asian American studies, in an ideal position within US academia to practice such relational theory in order to recognize structural inequalities, to produce counter-hegemonic knowledge, and to overcome the universal/particular binary that frames (for example) white/non-white binaries. Ethnic representations are not only structured by race, class, gender or sexuality, these variables are also epistemological formations intimately related to American national subjecthood and histories (10-27).

Arab American studies' recent expansion as a field has a lot to offer to these debates. Pickens would certainly add Arab American studies to Lionnet and Shih's list as a particularly productive theoretical space for relationality. The Arab American racial experience, an impossible in-between location at the US color line, not only makes the material impact of black/white binaries visible, but also highlights how Arabness and Blackness function in relation to each other (11). Anti-Arab and black racisms share a range of factors: heterogeneous discourses of oppression and resistance set within a context marked by stereotypes that frame the conditions of possibility for

self-representation. However, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, the relationship between Arab and African Americans was often fraught. Arab Americans on probationary whiteness used hostility towards African Americans as an entry ticket into Americanness, while African Americans could feel complicity with anti-immigration sentiments and white supremacy to secure their own access to citizenship rights. From a relational perspective, however, recognizing the many ways in which Arab and African American bodies have been inscribed in pre-defined racial subject positions, both in relation and in opposition to each other, can also help unpack what Pickens calls "the ideology of whiteness, maleness and able-bodiedness as normal and national" (9).

Another important element of Arab Americans' relational position within US ethno-racial histories is how Arab Americans shared both racial ambivalence (being located between the US black/white binary) and access to a degree of white privilege with Asian Americans. Leslie Bow's poignant question "where did the Asian sit on the segregated bus?" (1) goes to the heart of the impossible logics of the black/white system that continues to shape US culture and access to civil rights until today. While European ethnic immigrant communities, such as Irish or Italian Americans, shared this racially ambivalent position of being 'not-quite' white at the beginning of the twentieth century, they eventually assimilated into a universal sense of whiteness —even when celebrating their ethnic roots (Guterl; Frye Jacobson). Most non-European immigrant groups, however, have retained a degree of racial stigma and remained 'not quite white.' The precarious, context-specific access to white privilege of Asian Americans is a case in point. For example, even during the peak of orientalist frenzy aimed at the interned Japanese Americans during World War II, Japanese Americans could still ride on the front of the bus in the segregated Jim Crow South as honorary whites. A comparative view of the fluctuating relationships of Asian and Arab Americans

to US racial classifications further reveals the ever-shifting access to privilege and internal contradictions of white supremacy.[18]

Asian and Arab Americans could access tenuous positions of racial privilege at given times, and their communities' racial status and civil rights have continuously been impacted by US foreign policy interests overseas. However, a key difference in their racialization is the Western association of Arabness with Islam. While Asian Americans from the 1960s onwards battled racial stereotypes as 'model minorities,' since the advent of the war on terror, Arab Americans have become much more negatively racialized as un-American and dangerous. [19] Part of my research into the strategies of self-representation of early Arab Americans thus also looks at how racializing specters of 'Islam' already operated in the early Arab American proximity to whiteness of the mostly Christian Syrian American communities.

In their multiple relations to blackness, DuBois' original conception of "the color line" in *The Souls of Black Folk* did not account for the interstitial location of Asian, Native and Mexican Americans, who remained in a social limbo during the Jim Crow era of formalized racial segregation (Bow). Immigrant communities often responded to being located as "impossible subjects" (Ngai, *Impossible*) in the face of legal segregation by distancing themselves from blackness, if incorporation into whiteness was not an option. Bow cites Cuban Americans as an example of a community's claim to identity as "negatively derived out of self-differentiation from

[18] Further, different "Asian American"' positions have shifted at different times: For example, the anti-Japanese sentiment of WWII also generated a shifting sympathy toward the Chinese who previously had been the focal point of racial exclusion. And as Erica Lee demonstrates in *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943,* the enforcement of Chinese exclusion was far from uniform, changed over time and was also constantly challenged by incoming Chinese migrants during the period of exclusion itself.

[19] To the point that after 9/11 blackness was purportedly read as a sign of belonging and patriotic Americanness in opposition to Arab enemies, but most of actual African and Arab Americans realized that this gesture was not an elevation of blackness, but a downgrading of Arab Americanness "into a new, but lowly domestic racial category" (Bayoumi 135).

blackness, an identification with 'whiteness' that erases ethnic particularism as a condition of national belonging" (10), a strategy Gualtieri's research on the lynching of Nicolas Romey also documented among early Syrian Americans. Bow summarizes such tendencies in the self-representation of 'anomalous' / interstitial communities as either performing exclusion, erasure or incorporation in order to conform to the cultural logic of white supremacy. On the other hand, the very presence of such interstitial communities challenges a binary racial logic. I follow here Bow's assertion that an analysis of in-between racial identities does not seek to reify the black/white binary, but rather reveals how the binary and racial constructions function as a system of relations. Racial ambivalence is central to understanding both the flexibility in white supremacy, which can accommodate internal contradictions, and to envisioning alternative connections and affiliations (1-13). My dissertation, then, further adds a more gender-specific focus to these ethnic studies frames, since adaptations of tropes of womanhoods were central to the negotiation of Arab American racial ambivalence.

Adaptive agency was one strategy for Arab Americans as an interstitial community to negotiate their self-representation: for example, in the service of erasure (and celebration!) of their Arab heritage, in distancing themselves from blackness, or in seeking incorporation into white privilege. My focus on adaptation allows me to look at how gender, race, ethnicity and class intersect in Arab American negotiations of racial ambivalence, and in some cases, we can also see unexpected, multidirectional associations that exceed exclusion, erasure or incorporation as ways of managing the black/white binary. While there is little evidence of direct cooperation between Arab and African American women in the early twentieth century, I argue that we can see what Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson call "strange affinities" (2) between how Arab and African American women used conceptions of womanhood to claim access to the rights

American citizenship should afford them. Kyungwon Hong and Ferguson point out that beyond ethnic/cultural politics, gender and sexuality politics are central elements when comparing racial formations within the US. Affinity as an analytical lens can point to historic similarities in oppression, but also account for the highly diverse needs of members of any ethnic group instead of assuming homogeneity (2-4). Affinities between early Arab and African American women may appear in unexpected places; for example, in their respective use of respectability politics to access terms of True Womanhood, or in struggles against the hyper-sexualized associations with black and oriental women's bodies. While there has been an increasing scholarly focus on contemporary affinities and coalitions between Arab American feminists and other women of color in the US, there remains a lot of research to be done in this area for the pre-1967 period. I hope that my dissertation contributes to a scholarly shift in this direction.

Chapter 1 - The Harem Woman and the Family Portrait

Arab American Women's Embodied Self-Representation after the Chicago World Fair

Photographs document self-representation through embodiment and are among the earliest archival traces of Arab American women's public agency in the US. This chapter examines how these embodied forms of self-representations of 'Arab' women engaged in two major, seemingly opposite, visual traditions: the performance of staged harem fantasies as belly dancers, and the first family and/or self-portraits of respectable Syrian-Lebanese American immigrant women. The first part of the chapter re-visits Ashea Wabe's role as 'Little Egypt' in the Seeley Dinner Scandal. Through the court proceedings, newspaper reports on her appearance, her promotional photographs and public fame as a belly dancer, Wabe's 'scandal' offers a rare archival snapshot of the impact/reception of an Arab American women's adaptive agency. Diane Taylor situates photography as a medium that can capture and transfer the meanings of performances and scenarios in an archive. Photographs as historical documents are also not simply material references to a 'truth' but, as Ariella Azoulay points out, events produced in collaboration between multiple agents (the photographer, the subjects of the images and its producers/settings). Not unlike adaptations and performances, the meaning of photographs emerges out of a process that changes with the reception environment over time and materializes only in interaction with a viewer in a given reproduction (10-13). The interplay between Wabe's embodied self-representation and its immediate media reception in the court room documents this intersubjective process of meaning-making through her adaptive agency. What is more, we can also discern how Wabe engaged with the racial politics of US specific harem scenarios through her embodied self-representation.

Family portraits of Syrian immigrant women, on the other hand, were rarely accompanied by contextual archival material. In many cases all we have is the photograph, a date and sometimes a location. However, as a visual documentation of women's embodied self-representation family portraits engage in adapting and shaping scenarios of racial and gendered norms of their time as well. In this chapter, I focus on portraits made prior to the legal admission of Syrian immigrants as Caucasians into US citizenship in 1915, reading the visual traces of these women's embodied self-representation in relation to the wider, historical context. To this end, I argue that their carefully crafted appearances as bourgeois mothers adapted repertoires of respectability to support the Syrian American community's fight for legal access to US citizenship and whiteness. These adaptive choices can communicate interracial affinities with African American women's respectability politics, at least on the undetermined side of reception. Even if there are no material traces of co-operations between Syrian and African American women at the time, for viewers the affinities in their embodied representations of respectability can generate impact on an affective level. Elsepth Brown and Thy Phu call for renewed attention to the "feeling" of photography and the wide range of possible analytical approaches to photography in the wake of the affective turn (6). The similarities in material traces of Syrian and African American women's adaptive agency —in gestures, clothing choices and postures that denote respectability—may trigger unintended feelings of solidarity in a joint affective re-orientation of the norms of white, national womanhood.

This chapter's analysis of both belly dancers' and Syrian immigrant women's earliest embodied adaptive agency answers one of the questions that—given the lack of archival material —cannot be conclusively dealt with otherwise: Did the national prominence of belly dancing and harem fantasies impact the self-representation of incoming Syrian women, and if so, how? The hypervisibility of belly dancers in US media after 1893 stands in stark contrast to the archival

invisibility of early Syrian immigrant women. Yet we do not know much about the women behind famous belly dancing acts, like Wabe, either. Historical photographs' material referentiality offer some traces to deduce agency: for example, in reading women's expressions for signs of resistance. Amira Jarmakani analyses the absent gazes of the staged girls in the World Fair photograph "Three Dancing Girls From Egypt" as a form of passive resistance (*Imagining* 101). However, when it comes to the pro-active use of self-promotion by belly dancers and the majority of Arab American women at the time, the incoming Syrian-Lebanese women, it remains unclear how "the scores of Arab and Arab American women (…) had their realities understood and determined by the flattened image of the 'dancing girl'" (101). While not directly related, I argue here that the adaptation and/or disavowal of associations with racializing, orientalist harem fantasies indirectly linked belly dancers' and early immigrants' self-representation.

Adaptive agency opens critical perspectives beyond resistance and reveals the multiple relations between Syrian American women's self-representation, as *oriental immigrants*, and US racial imaginaries—including, but also exceeding, the flattening associations with dancing girls. Syrian American family portraits did not directly respond to harem fantasies, but their emphasis on respectability disavowed associations with the very oriental licentiousness that Wabe eagerly adapted for her self-promotion. In both cases then harem tropes influenced how these women mediated 'Arabness' and/or 'Syrianness' for American publics. What is more, World Fair photography explicitly placed Syrian women immigrants in proximity to belly dancers, while also implying their potential for respectability as *Christian* Syrian women. In response to this hegemonic photographic framing, I situate Syrian American family portraits as a disavowal of US orientalist stereotypes *and* as an emplacement strategy as immigrants that resonates in complex ways with black orientalist legacies as well. Finally, the quest for proximity to cultural whiteness

through embodied representations of respectable womanhood relates Syrian American women's portraits to other multi-ethnic traditions of self-portraits, such as Chinese immigrants' photographic self-representation to circumvent the Exclusion Act or African American repertoires of visual respectability politics.

Ashea Wabe and the US American Harem Scenario

Ashea Wabe's embodied performances of 'Little Egypt'—as a belly dancer, on stages, on Broadway, and ultimately also in the court room during the hearings for the 'Seeley Scandal' — function as a transnational node that links domestic racial performances with the legacies of colonial harem fantasies. Wabe's most obvious adaptive choice was her use of the already well-known stage character 'Little Egypt'—also used by many other belly dancers in the years between 1893 and early 1900s. The exact origin of 'Little Egypt' as a stage name remains unclear. 'Little Egypt' supposedly was the most famous belly dancer at the Chicago World Fair. However, as Donna Carlton concludes in her comprehensive study of all belly dancers claiming to be 'Little Egypt,' there simply was no original dancer called 'Little Egypt' at the Fair. Nevertheless, 'Little Egypt' as a performative character must have come into circulation soon thereafter. The fact that Wabe was not present as a dancer at the Fair but referred to herself as 'Little Egypt' in 1897 indicates that the name was already in circulation by the time she danced in New York. It came to represent *the* American oriental belly dancer and developed tremendous staying power in US cultural memory through its continued adaptation in film and music up to the 1960s (Carlton 78-82).

In this section, I center my analysis on Wabe's performance of the 'Little Egypt' character since she was the first dancer to reach nation-wide fame under this name due to the Seeley scandal

(Carlton 93). After the publicity due to the trial, many different women used the name 'Little Egypt' to promote themselves,[20] but I am specifically interested in how Wabe's adaptive agency shaped the entry of 'Little Egypt' into the national imagination and the associations of belly dancing with harem fantasies. Carlton describes Wabe as "[a] woman who made the most of her situation. In short, she was the colonial harem woman in America, the land of opportunity" (77). While Carlton already notes that Wabe may have used, but was not confined by, these stereotypical terms, I am interested in exploring more deeply what it means that Wabe herself not only adapts elements of harem fantasies *from* Orientalisms, but also *to* the US racial imaginary. I posit that in doing so, her embodiment of 'Little Egypt' then shapes an emerging American version of the harem scenario on and beyond the nation's stages.

Auto-orientalist adaptation of colonial harem fantasies undoubtedly informs Wabe's self-representation and links her performances to transnational circulation of gendered, orientalist stereotypes. Harem fantasies run deep and across various media that shaped French and British colonial/orientalist discourses, as well as European cultural production at large. Harems were a common trope for transcultural adaptation, ranging from cultural productions as varied as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's operas to the writings of Gustave Flaubert and Lady Montague. Even though harem fantasies had a specific function in US Orientalisms, they were also influenced by both British and French colonial reference frames. Malek Alloula outlines how photography and colonial postcards of Algerian women spread harem fantasies to nineteenth century France, which then influenced also the French cultural sphere (11-15). Alloula's analysis of the images of veiled/unveiled Algerian women, staged in photo studios and disseminated in the age of

[20] Some dancers, like Fahreda Mazhar, went to great lengths to claim they were the original 'Little Egypt.' Mazhar, a Syrian dancer born in Damascus but trained in Egypt, even went to court to sue and keep other dancers from using the name (Carlton 70-1).

mechanical reproduction via printed postcards, reveals French colonial desires and frustrations: a craving for access to Algerian women's bodies that were blocked from view via veils and harem walls. Brian T. Edwards argues in his book *Morocco Bound* that this French/North African imperial frame was also of foundational importance to the formation of contemporary American Orientalisms (2). The export of belly dancing and the transnational flow of harem stereotypes between France and the United States around 1900 already reflected an early level of Maghrebi-French-American connection, but it also included British colonial mediation. Bald Vivek asserts that American Orientalisms, particularly in the early 1900s, were also driven by an aspiration to empire inspired by the frame of the British Empire and its rule in India (28-29).

While this desire for and proxy-identification with British imperialism often played out via consumerism and the consumption of oriental goods, entertainment was another key area of this transfer. In addition to the Chicago World Fair, oriental shows, circuses, and films featuring 'Little Egypts' proliferated in the United States in the early twentieth century. Such cultural productions were only accepted if they fulfilled the sexualized harem scenario and thus seemed 'authentic' to American audiences. Vivek cites a case where a traditional Indian dance troupe was very ill received in New York, because they did not fulfill the audience's expectations of Eastern dancers shaped via the harem lady/belly dancer conflation (33). This anecdote exemplifies the solidification of the sexualized belly dancer as a hegemonic trope in twentieth century American Orientalisms that framed and glossed over all ethnic differences (within and beyond) the Middle East, India or Japan.

Historically, belly dancing shows as proxy harem fantasies developed in colonial Egypt. Carlton outlines how Egyptians produced a whole belly dancing industry to cater to European, mostly British, audiences. The so-called *ghawazi* were professional dancers and very popular with

European soldiers and tourists during colonial times, starting with the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt in the early nineteenth century. These women were often perceived as prostitutes rather than as professional dancers, and their performances were only allowed in Egyptian tourist hot spots. The physical transfer of belly dancing shows across the Atlantic relied heavily on the Western World Fair model. Via the World Fair in Paris (1889) this style of dancing then travelled to the United States and made its entrance on the American stage in Chicago in 1893 (40-44). The Chicago World Fair was designed to represent imperial power and civilizational progress in its buildings, layout, and "human showcases" (13). The division of the Chicago World Fair into a 'White City' and the 'Midway Plaisance' for entertainment spectacles created racial and gendered hierarchies that placed the white Western male at the apex of evolution and racialized spectacles like belly dancing on lower steps of the scale. Marilyn Booth further demonstrates that Egyptians were fully aware of these orientalist mis-representations via the export of the *ghawazi* dance style overseas (280). Egyptian newspapers sharply protested against the stereotypical portrayal of Egypt at the Chicago World Fair via belly dancing on the Cairo Street, but at the same time both 'Egyptian' dancers and US booking agents were able to propel their careers by utilizing these stereotypes. The popularity of belly dancing and the shift in US Orientalisms toward sexualized specters of harems gave European orientalist stock elements about oriental women, such as the veil, the harem and the belly dancer, a new platform in the American context (Jarmakani, *Imagining* 186).

Finally, belly dancing as orientalist and sexualized spectacle grated against US American gender norms as well. The first belly dancing shows at the Chicago World Fair triggered considerable controversy. Moral outrage was a common reaction, but Carlton also points to members of working class audiences that enjoyed 'Little Egypt' shows for defying elitist moral

codes (78). The dialectic between rejection and fascination also applied to female audiences. Many 'respectable' women were deeply offended by the sexualized displays, but some also appreciated the performances. A few "Lady Managers" at the World Fair, such as Ida Craddock, actually endorsed belly dancing as liberating and edifying for women (86). Belly dancers, as projection screens for national debates about proper womanhood, could thus evoke more radical ideas of sexually independent New Womanhood. The New Woman emerged as transatlantic ideal of modern womanhood, spurred by literary and social developments like the suffragette movement, in both British and American contexts. In the US, the New Woman became part of the ideals of the progressive era, with roots in the 1880s and 90s and a peak impact in the early 1900s and 10s. The educated, working and sexually liberated New Woman embodied progressive visions and white, middle-class feminist ideals, but at the same time re-inscribed racial and class-based exclusions. Charlotte Rich emphasizes that it is thus important to acknowledge the complexities of New Woman figure in American literature (and, in this dissertation, culture) from multi-ethnic perspectives (1-4). To this end, chapters two and three will address the (belated) intersections of this particular ideal with Syrian American community formation in the 1920s and the transnational circulations of the New Woman. For now, I want to point out that as an ideal the New Woman was often seen in contrast to, or even as a direct refutation of, the older ideals of True Womanhood.

The moral outrage in response to belly dancers' sexualized performances functioned thus also as a confirmation of the continued necessity of the Victorian moral codes of True Womanhood as bulwarks against modern changes. Wabe's performances further underline how intimately such gendered ideals were linked to racial politics. True Womanhood as an ideology excluded black (and oriental) women from access to respectable American womanhood. Only Anglo American women were the truly American women and this delineation rested on the dehumanization and

hyper-sexualization of black women's bodies during and after slavery (Christian 10). While many African American writers and activists, such as Pauline Hopkins, Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper, fought against these sexualized stereotypes about black womanhood as "Jezebels," the stereotype's influence remained palpable in American culture (Carby 20-3). The latter part of this chapter shows that Syrian American immigrant women also adapted visual codes of True Womanhood to claim their respectability. However, this was not the case with Ashea Wabe. She appears to have actively courted the marketability of associations with sexualized Jezebels in her embodied representation of orientalist harem fantasies.

Burlesque, Minstrelsy and Belly Dancing

Belly dancing as a performative genre engaged with the race-centered traditions of the local US entertainment industries as well. For example, Wabe's appearance at the scandalous Seeley dinner propelled her from travelling belly dancer to protagonist in a burlesque play on Broadway. Even the mere fact that she had been hired by Henry Barnum Seeley for his bachelor party links Wabe to the origins of burlesque and vaudeville shows in America: The New England Historical Society notes that Henry Barnum Seeley was the grandson of P.T. Barnum, the most famous entrepreneur of the budding entertainment industry ("P.T. Barnum's Grandson"). Before the advent of movies, travelling shows were by far the most popular form of entertainment in the nation. Such shows toured across the country, providing entertainment and the thrill of 'novelties' in remote places.[21] Between 1880 and 1910, vaudeville shows began to establish themselves more locally in theaters (Lewis 315). Oscar Hammerstein's Olympia Theater in New York was one such

[21] While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is a notable affinity between peddling and travelling showmanship. In many ways the popularity of "the wandering peddler of wonders with his portable cabinet of curiosities" (Lewis 5) would have prepared the ground for later auto-orientalist business performances of Syrian peddlers selling trinkets from the Holy Land.

vaudeville institution, and in 1897 Hammerstein decided to write and produce the burlesque *Silly's Dinner*, starring Wabe herself, based on the real-life event.

By this time, burlesque had become part of mainstream entertainment. Burlesque developed as one element in increasingly popular vaudeville shows, which featured a wide variety of entertainment acts, including minstrelsy. Early burlesque thrived on cross dressing, satire of classical genres, and other forms of travesty.[22] However, the more institutionalized such performances became, the less such shows challenged societal norms. By the turn of the twentieth century, burlesque had come to denote primarily performances of scantily dressed women, exemplified by highly successful productions such as the Ziegfeld Follies fantasies. Wabe's toying with potentially scandalous female nudity alone can thus not explain the public outrage and scandal around her role at the bachelor party and at Broadway. Hammerstein quickly wrote "Silly's Dinner" once the scandal reached national notoriety, and subsequently he too was charged in court "with Maintaining a Nuisance and Giving an Immoral Show in Producing a Burlesque on the Seeley Dinner" ("Hammerstein Indicted" 2). Hammerstein and Wabe would have welcomed such publicity, but I am most interested here in the likelihood that Wabe's case was so scandalous because of its direct resonances with US racial imaginaries and indirect nods to minstrelsy.

Hammerstein's production of "Silly's Dinner" with 'Little Egypt,' Wabe herself, as a protagonist is remarkable in multiple ways. Its appeal rested on Wabe's status as an oriental belly dancer, and her embodiment of the transnational circulations of harem fantasies cited above; however, the script for "Silly's Dinner" was based on a local New York event and Wabe's own experience. This was highly unusual: Carlton points out that the Olympia Theater mostly ran shows

[22] The first burlesque performances in the US were imported acts from Great Britain in the 1860s, and the bold, sexualized performances of dancers like Lydia Thompson challenged established gender norms on stage (Allen 26).

based on literary adaptations from Europe (67-8). In "Silly's Dinner" the burlesque created a new type of story in its intersection between transnational harem fantasies (embodied by Wabe) and its American setting (a scandal in New York high society). Further, burlesques and other vaudeville shows usually starred white European or American artist. The casting of Wabe as an oriental woman at the Olympia Theater thus aimed at mining her 'racial authenticity' in representing harem fantasies.

While not identical, the intimate relationship between burlesque and minstrelsy prepared the grounds for Wabe's success and access to the public sphere. As performative genres of stereotypical racial representations, belly dancing and minstrelsy share the commodification of a hegemonic view of other people's 'culture.' Reception is a complex question here. Eric Lott notes that audiences of minstrelsy knew these caricatures, performances of 'Jim Crow' or 'Mammy' (by both white *and* black actors), were not authentic, and yet their cultural dominance derived from their assumed representativeness of African American folk culture (224). Both burlesque and minstrelsy became popular as forms of working-class entertainment during the middle of the 19th century, displacing anxieties over unemployment and changing societal norms, as well as facilitating nostalgia for a pre-industrial past and racial superiority (Detsi 103, 119). The emerging popularity of belly dancing in the 1890s responded to economic, racial and gendered anxieties as well. Despite the initial potential of such racializing performances for a social and class critique, they became instrumental in establishing the hegemony of very specific stereotypes in the US racial imaginary. Minstrelsy was even so hegemonic that "(t)hrough Jim Crow plays, Blackface performances in traveling circuses, and racial ephemera in the home, Blackness came to instantiate what would become U.S. popular culture" (Cobb 10).

Furthermore, belly dancing and minstrelsy 'met' at the very moment of transition from staged performances to the emerging movie industry, the dominant form of popular culture in the 20th century. Just before 1900, the developing film technology would offer a new medium for public entertainment. Robert Jackson argues that most of the predominantly white, early film makers "simply participated in the life of their culture, absorbing and reflecting the racism—casual or vitriolic, unconscious or intellectualized—of the era" (29). He emphasizes that the years between 1900 and 1920 were marked by especially vitriolic forms of racism and the mutual reinforcement of patriotism and whiteness. They were fueled by the emergence of imperial racist hierarchies to rationalize US invasions of Cuba and the Philippines, as well as the solidification of racial segregation at home. This included the mass-meditation of lynchings as spectacles that also shaped the racial aesthetics for early American film, even before the formative influence of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of the Nation* in 1915. It is thus significant that in these early years the belly dance stage became one of the first, popular settings for the budding film industry, developing side by side with the adaptation of minstrelsy to the big screen.

Thomas Edison's earliest films are a case in point. The first films he shot in the Black Maria studios in New Jersey after 1895 included both belly dancing and "watermelon" films, such as *Princess Ali / Egyptian Dance* (1895) and the *Watermelon Contest* (1896). Jackson positions the watermelon movies, caricatures of black people eating watermelons, as a discrete/recognizable, highly popular genre. Such early film productions were geared more to spectacle than narrative development, representing primarily the 'primitivity' of its black characters (29-32). The racial stereotypes developed on minstrel stages were thus eminently adaptable to such film settings, offering a smooth transition from minstrelsy to film in maintaining the hegemony of black stereotypes in the formation of US popular culture. Belly dancing, as another kind of racializing

and sexualized spectacle, was also very popular at the time. Referring to the transition from stage to screen, Carlton describes the character of 'Little Egypt' in no uncertain terms as the "first screen sex goddess of America" (78). What is more, later film productions drawing on harem fantasies – – from *The Sheik* (1921) all the way to *I Dream of Jeannie* in the late 1960s and beyond—cast mostly white female protagonists (Naber 25). However, during the transition to movie productions, which coincided with the popularity of performed belly dancing shows after the Chicago World Fair, the travelling dancers themselves were the protagonists. I argue that this intersection between these women's physical presence and the racializing discursive context of their performances is what enabled their adaptive agency. The embodied self-representation of belly dancers in this moment, such as Wabe's part in re-creating harem scenarios for US audiences, engaged in the cross-cultural translation of European colonial harem fantasies *and* their domestic adaptation to the racial templates of US popular culture.

Jarmakani further emphasizes that the racial logics behind minstrelsy and belly dancing were different, but the ambivalent audience response characteristic for minstrelsy, in which people "were equally attracted (…) and repulsed," also applies to a "complex dialectic of attraction and rejection" that "figures into the construction of the belly dancer as racialized and sexualized other" (*Imagining* 65). Another notable point of convergence is the centrality of the body and the ambivalent agency of performers themselves. Lott states that "early blackface performance was one of the first constitutive discourses of the body in American culture" (231), focusing in particular on containing and consuming the sexualized black male body. Belly dancing, in turn, commodified and facilitated access to sexualized, oriental female bodies, and in ways that displaced the legacies of black women's sexual exploitation onto orientalist locales/bodies. I show in the following that Wabe's adaptive choices in her embodied performances of 'Little Egypt'

courted this displacement. Presenting herself as a Jezebel/harem slave emplaces Wabe within the scope of blackness in US popular culture in ways that purely orientalist performances could not. For her American viewers, Wabe's performance not only presented access to a 'forbidden' harem scenario, but also evoked a historical sense of entitlement to access non-white women's bodies deriving from US slavery and white supremacy. Wabe's embodied performance shaped thus a specific intersection of racial and harem fantasies which I call the US American harem scenario.

A Harem Scenario in the Making

Diane Taylor's concept of a scenario as a meaning-making paradigm is essential to understand how Wabe's adaptive agency used and shaped racial discourses in ways that exceed her immediate performance. A scenario refers to certain meanings that emerge and solidify out of repetitions in performative repertoires. Such patterns can be traced in archival material that registers certain features of an ephemeral, embodied performance via staging/settings, gestures, clothing, milieux, behavior, or tone. These elements then accumulate and develop into more stable meanings that can be analyzed retrospectively, including also rituals and other non-verbal practices reminiscent of literary analysis, such as plot and narrative, which are implicit in the set up (Taylor 24). A scenario may develop outside conventional archival structures that define hegemonic perceptions of history, but this does not mean it reflects automatically positions of resistance. On the contrary, scenarios often support dominant cultural ideas that actively produce racial or gendered difference. For example, Taylor considers the repeated staging of rituals about how white 'settlers' 'discovered' Native Americans in various cultural media a typical scenario, albeit one of conquest that affirms the imperial nature of the United States in these patterns (53).

I read the embodied manifestations of harem fantasies in belly dancing as such an imperial scenario. Belly dancing shows feature recognizable patterns in their set-ups. As a harem scenario

these repeated features produce oriental Otherness in the female dancers while re-assuring its American viewers about the legitimacy of white supremacy. However, in each repetition the dancers themselves may also adapt the non-verbal practices of the scenario, such as gestures, clothing, or behavior. A belly dancer's adaptive agency thus draws on distinct, recognizable features that are essential to the set-up of any orientalist harem scenario. In its most basic terms, orientalist imagination casts the harem as an eroticized and luxurious but dark and confined space where sexually available women are locked in and await their turn to satisfy the sultan/sheik or any other male, patriarchal figure. When belly dancing shows arrived at the Chicago World Fair, newspapers like Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly* advertised these new shows by drawing on such elements (qtd in Carlton 72). Leslie's August 1893 cover illustration is a very good example of how the media imagined a harem scenario. The illustration depicts a belly dancer front and center, but the setting evokes an orientalist harem, not a theatrical stage at the World Fair. The style and setting of the drawing resemble the European orientalist tradition of harem paintings: it includes a black eunuch, passive harem ladies in the background, and a sexualized belly dancer in scant garments dancing in the middle of a dark, enclosed space. Essentially this image draws on the transnational purchase of harem fantasies to introduce belly dancing as a new kind of live, performative event to US audiences. What is more, the newspaper advertised the dancer in the illustration, probably Fahreda Mazhar, simply as an Egyptian dancing girl (Carlton 73). Dancers such as Mazhar were rarely individually acknowledged, and the exotic appeal of Egypt, emerging out of the harem scenario, overshadowed the individuality of the dancers. Nevertheless, the illustration offers a glimpse into the centrality of embodied presentations for the development of the performed harem scenario in the American context, particularly when we contrast the

illustration with the way in which Wabe presents herself in a promotional photograph just four years later (fig. 1).

The New York Public Library holds promotional studio photos that display Ashea Wabe in full costume (fig. 1). Even though there is no meta-data about this photograph available, it is quite likely that it was a promotional shot taken after the Seeley Dinner scandal—especially when we compare the photo with the description of her costume in the trial (see below). Clothes and gestures are central elements in the development of a scenario, and by comparing the costume drawn for the belly dancer in Frank Leslie's illustration (Carlton 72) with Wabe's own promotional shot, we can situate her self-representation within the transnational flow of harem imagery. The costume in the illustration seems to draw its inspiration from colonial photography and the French-Algerian connection. Based on the different types of photographic portraits in circulation, Alloula has identified the typical features of the French colonial harem fantasies. Algerian women in the photography studios were dressed in gossamer fabric, gauze and tulle, covering parts of their body to varying degrees, and they usually wore many jewels— all suggesting intimacy and access to this intimacy for the viewer (106). The women's bodies are the central focus of the photographs: the setup varies from 'artistic' shots to an outright full display of naked bodies, but in all shots the women look at the camera and lift their veils at least partially. We find a very similar array of costumes among the first photographs and films of belly dancers in the United States. Not all of them danced in stereotypical harem outfits: some dancers chose even very traditional clothing that fully covered their bodies (fig. 2), while others like Wabe pushed the limits of how much skin one could reveal in the late nineteenth-century United States.

Another comparison between Wabe's promotional photo (fig. 1) and a still (fig. 2) taken from Thomas Edison's short film *Princess Ali / Egyptian Dance*, shot in 1895 at his Black Maria

Studio in Orange, NJ and now housed at the archive of the Library of Congress, further illustrates this point.

Figure. 1. Ashea Wabe as *Little Egypt*
Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

Figure. 2. *Princess Ali / Egyptian Dance* (1895)
Hendricks Collection, Library of Congress

Both images reflect how the embodied presence of the dancers represent colonial harem fantasies in costumes, fully equipped with veils and jewelry. The costume of Princess Ali, however, covers most of her body and does not consist of the stereotypical gauze and tulle fantasy materials. Her performance is centered on her dance and evokes the harem scenario much more in the setting and staging. She dances in a dark, enclosed space surrounded by men and other onlookers, which emplaces also the American viewer as part of the harem. Wabe, by contrast, is located in a studio environment, and here her costume does most of the work of establishing a harem scenario in the viewers' minds. She stands on an oriental rug in front of a wall decorated with Egyptian

hieroglyphs, but her body and her clothes are the focal point for the viewers' attention. Her raised hands hold a transparent scarf; she slightly bows to her audience and exposes both her scantily clad upper body and her upper leg. She combines here the harem fantasy stock element of a halter top with the Euro-American sex symbols of strapless stockings and high heels. Perhaps most striking is her wide smile and radiance—she at least seems to enjoy casting herself as alluring in an orientalist way. While, as Jarmakani points out, other belly dancers appear to be staged reluctantly in photographs and express resistance though their absent gazes, Wabe is not just passively staged; on the contrary, she uses her adaptive agency as a dancer to embody the stock elements of the 'Little Egypt' character. Her performance makes the fantasies we can see in the drawing used by the *Illustrated Weekly* to advertise belly dancing come alive.

Adaptive agency in embodied self-representation mediates between the "once-againness" (Taylor 32) of individual performances and the palimpsestuous, self-perpetuating nature of racializing stereotypes. Wabe's adaptive agency in harem scenarios reveals how this very tension enables her performative impact beyond the theater. As staged productions, belly dancing shows reflect the specific aesthetic logics of theatricality. Embodied representations of actors are at the same time material and symbolic. Leopold Lippert emphasizes that this "structural doubleness" (63), the simultaneity of embodiment and replacement, is not only an aesthetic characteristic of theatrical performances, but eminently political—especially if such structural doubleness exceeds the stage into performances within the social sphere at large (60-3). Both performance and adaptation studies work with various conceptions of repetition with differences as the intersection between aesthetic choices and politics. Adaptive agency focuses on the degrees and kinds of changes in repetitions of racial tropes of womanhood, in embodied representation (the material) and discursive replacement (the symbolic), to interpret Arab American women's cultural agency–

–with or without expressed political intention. Even a stereotypical harem scenario is never purely a repetition, but always 'once again' as its production and reception changes with the involved bodies, contexts and women's adaptive agency. At the same time, the recognizable repetitions emplace such individual performances in past layers of meaning registered in archival materials and scenarios. Furthermore, as sources for adaptive agency are not restricted to theatrical productions but include cultural tropes, embodied performances offer a mode of self-representation that can easily practice structural doubleness in the social sphere. Wabe's case is again a prime example—her act literally carries the harem scenario off stage and into the 'real' world.

Wabe uses the courtroom as a performance space to bolster the truth claim that she offers authentic access to 'Arab' womanhood by recreating a harem scenario—a room full of men staring at her, titillated by the thought that she might have undressed herself in public. Even though Wabe is fully dressed and present in her capacity as witness at court, her past performances as 'Little Egypt' palimpsestuously register in the harem scenarios in the audience's minds. She turns the courtroom itself into a stage. The *Boston Daily Globe* report that I quoted at the beginning of the introduction describes how "the gaping crowd" interacts with Wabe who returns the gaze as she "looked around boldly, curiously." Her embodied self-representation adapts orientalist stock elements—"Her face was painted, as were the faces of those who danced before the Pharaoh of old" —and her character brings a spectacle of sexual titillation to the court room: "The dress fitted her from neck to heels as if she had melted in the stifling atmosphere and been poured into it. Pray be patient with this description—a man writes it ("A La Tribly" 1). This description is mediated through the gaze, and the desire, of the reporter. The *Globe* reporter imagines how she seems to have "melted" and been "poured into" her dress, clearly invoking her naked body. Her actual dress

does not matter to him: his fantasy is more occupied with filling in the missing markers of the harem scenario he wants to see. His account of Wabe's choices in make-up, dress and behavior nevertheless indirectly reveal her adaptive agency, and the influence of her embodied performance on how the harem scenario emerged between herself and the courtroom audience.

The exact features of Wabe's past embodied self-representation as a belly dancer were further discussed as evidence in the Chapman trial. Even before her personal testimony, Wabe's costume in her performance as 'Little Egypt' was a matter of heated debate in court. Various other vaudeville dancers, who had also been hired to perform that night, had to testify as to what Wabe had been wearing, and multiple newspaper reports closely followed the tantalizing details. In a "Special Dispatch" to *The San Francisco Chronicle* on January 10, 1897, the reporter quotes a statement by Miss Minnie Renwood about Wabe's costume: "'Slippers, stockings, gauze, bloomers, garters, a little bolero jacket and fez'—'Could you see through the gauze?'—'Of course, you could see her flesh. Her person was entirely exposed'" ("The Seeley Dinner A Vulgar Orgy" 18). Another dancer, Miss Mortimer, went on to add the scandalous detail that 'Little Egypt' had no tights beneath her gauze. The description resembles Wabe's studio photograph above, and further underlines how much Wabe curated her appearance for American oriental tastes, ranging from stockings to gauze sprinkled with a dash of exotic paraphernalia, such as Spanish boleros or Turkish fez hats, that could blend into orientalist fantasies of imagined 'Arab' womanhood. The vaudeville dancers were Wabe's competitors in the field and tried to paint her costume as immoral, but all these discussions of the costume—pre-circulating Wabe's actual court appearance—only helped to spread her fame. Any reader could imagine how 'Little Egypt' embodied a harem dancer, and Wabe herself capitalized on the public's obsession with her outfit during her testimony. She refuted the claim that she danced naked, but then stressed she was wearing gauze and that her outfit

"Eet is ze same as I weare at Hammerstein's" ("A la Tribly" 1). She unabashedly promoted her show by mentioning that she was wearing the same costume at the Olympia Theater as she did during the Seeley Dinner.

The audience response in the courtroom, the reporting about the case, Wabe's role on Broadway and her promotional photographs show that all involved parties consciously engaged with the ethnic and gendered harem stereotypes as an exciting performance across a wide range of media. The *Globe* reporter calls Wabe "an Egyptian by adoption" ("A La Tribly" 1) thereby recognizing the artificiality of her performance while embracing the spectacle of her Egyptian make-up, clothes and gestures, all of which toy with ideas of sexualized, exotic womanhood. Wabe was probably Algerian: her exact ethnic origins are not known, but we can deduce from her performance that she must have been very familiar with her American audience's expectations. When asked in court if she had been hired to dance naked, she replied: "Oh monsieur, just a little pose in the altogether, a little Egyptian slave girl, comprenez vous? The pose in the altogether was for the encore. 'I say I do what is proper for ar-r-r-t,' went on Little Egypt weaving her hands over her head. . ." (qtd. in Carlton 76). Wabe's court testimony strategically adapts the slave trope in her performances and self-representation, and these few sentences quoted above represent one version of many different newspaper reports about Wabe's court testimony. Due to the lack of archival material on Wabe's life and views, they are the most significant sources we have about the reception of Wabe's self-representation and about the role of race in her version of a harem scenario geared at US audiences.

'Just a little slave?' Little Egypt on the Auction Block

Wabe's performance as 'Little Egypt' in court further exemplifies the power of a harem scenario to mediate daily life interactions of ethnic and gendered difference between people, far beyond the stage or designated performance spaces. Wabe stays in character in court, blurring the line between her role as a social actor in the United States and her role as a belly dancer. The central discursive trope that links both her marketing as belly dancer and her defense at court is Wabe's self-representation as an Egyptian slave girl. Wabe thus not only performs an orientalist harem scenario, but also participates in American imperial projections of chattel slavery onto the Middle East via harem tropes. At first glance, she seems to do so for a very specific purpose: as a performer, her court statement claims art for art's sake, which foregrounds the performative nature of her act; however, as a social actor who has to defend herself in this court room, she also seeks to deflect responsibility by claiming (a performative) 'slave girl' status. This move uses the long American history of infantilizing slaves as incapable of taking care of themselves. Further, her gendered submission as a little, female Egyptian slave to her personal agent Phipp's wishes to dance naked uncannily plays with the histories of forced display of women's bodies and sexual exploitation during slavery. By posing as the small, 'innocent,' and insignificant slave girl/belly dancer, she performs a double submission to state and male authority in court—blurring the lines between slavery and harem fantasies.

This adaptive strategy then also emplaces Wabe in the US-specific intersections of slavery and Orientalisms already in circulation. I build here on Timothy Marr's work on the uses of harem tropes in nineteenth century US Orientalisms, particularly the enormous popularity of exhibits of *The Greek Slave* statue in the 1850s (274). *The Greek Slave* statue represented an imagined white, Western female captive in the Ottoman harem. As mentioned in the introduction, these early American harem fantasies centered on white female captivity to glorify notions of True

Womanhood as republican, American ideals against the despotic Orient. However, in Wabe's embodied representation as a 'harem slave,' she adapts these notions of female captivity, whiteness and sexual exploitation with entirely different racial subtexts. Rather than aspiring to respectability, she courts the stereotype concerning the supposed sexual voracity of black Jezebels for the benefit of their white masters, and uses it to enhance her appeal to her contemporaneous white audiences. I doubt Wabe herself had political intentions here, but her performance exposes how the staying power of Jezebel stereotypes facilitated the inscription of racialized harem fantasy into already circulating imaginations of fascinating/repulsive frames for black women's sexuality. Further, the shift from imagination to lived experience at a belly dancing show was crucial to Wabe's ability to adapt and write herself into the racial subtexts associated with harems in the United States. In the following, I unpack how Wabe's embodied performances of harem scenarios interact with racial and gendered imaginations of American womanhood.

As outlined above, Wabe's costume choices provide the most obvious clues to her personal adaptive agency, but it is her embodied performance, and her interaction with the present media at court, that explicitly develops the intersections of slavery tropes with harem fantasies. This media coverage is part of the written archive, but the variation in how reporters covered Wabe's statement offers a rare glimpse into the ongoing, performative negotiation of American racial imaginations between reporters as representative of the larger public sphere and Wabe as an individual belly dancer. The most striking feature in her testimony is that she refers to herself not just as 'Little Egypt,' but as a little Egyptian *slave*. The name 'Little Egypt' in itself already holds a host of mythical and racial references. In general, the reasons why this particular name caught on as the representation of a belly dancer in the United States are manifold. Carlton argues that it needed to be 'Little Egypt' not only because of the World Fair itself, but also because the name 'Little+place'

invokes geographic origins overseas and emplacement as immigrant communities in the United States. A reference to actually existing immigrant communities, such as 'Little Syria' on Washington Street, New York, at the time, could not provide a similarly effective associative connection to ancient civilization. Further, the mysteries of old Egyptian civilization and erotic goddesses as symbols of female sexual power were encapsulated in the evocation of Egypt (93). The American fascination with Egypt often rested on proxy imperial self-perceptions and notions of cultural stewardship.[23] The racial ambivalence of Egypt as a 'black' civilization, however, also allowed for African American counter narratives; for example, gospels such as "Go Down, Moses" imagined the biblical exodus in relation to African Americans' struggle for freedom from US slavery. In theory, Wabe's adaptation of the Egyptian slave trope as a sexually assertive, independent woman could have also evoked anti-slavery rhetoric for a critical audience; however, the available media response indicates that her performance as a slave girl instead revived black women's sexual exploitation during slavery.

Wabe presents herself in the form of "a little Egyptian slave girl" as "a pose," a performative act in itself. This highlights the importance of performance in auto-orientalist self-representation, as well as in her interaction with specters of slavery. Her reference to slavery is transnationally ambiguous. She refers to Egyptian/oriental slavery, which beyond its biblical resonances had a very different historical trajectory than American chattel slavery. But if we further overlay the idea of oriental slavery with her embodiment of harem fantasies, there appears an associative overlap between oriental and chattel slavery in the invocation of female captivity and potential sexual exploitation in domestic spaces. Carlton's initial analysis presents Wabe's testimony quite straightforwardly as coming from herself (76). In contrast, other news sources

[23] For more on why Americans tended to see the Egyptian empire as a direct ancestor of American civilization, see Melani McAlister (132, 140).

represent the scene more as a dialogue between her agent Phipps and Wabe, in which Phipps seems to suggest the slavery framing. *The Boston Daily Globe* wrote that Phipps wants her to do "a leetle Egyptian pose on a leetle pedestal in ze altogether [naked]" and that he asked her to "pose as a leetle Greek slave in ze altogether" ("A la Tribly" 1). Already here the pedestal in combination with the slave reference could refer to a stage as well as to an imagined auction block. What is more, no other newspaper makes any mention of framing Wabe as a 'Little Greek' slave: all other reports consistently frame Wabe as an 'Egyptian slave.' This brief interruption of the Greek slave is significant, however, even if we cannot tell exactly who introduced it—the reporter or Phipps himself. In either case, the reference invokes the above mentioned early American infatuation with harems as places of captivity and the threatening specter of sexual abuse of white Western women captives, represented by the famous *The Greek Slave* statue. Phipps may have wanted to simply invoke the statue's nudity in his marketing of Wabe, but the reference also places Wabe at the intersection of various specters of slavery (white, black, oriental) and orientalist harem fantasies that shaped the formation of the American racial imagination.

The Chicago Daily Tribune provides another angle and more details on the supposed arrangements: "'Mr. Phipps, he tell me,' Little Egypt replied, 'to do little dance and to pose like a little Egyptian slave, with little bracelet on my little ankle. He say for me to pose on a little pedestal in the altogether. Me say me do all what is proper for art, Oriental Dance and pose as little slave'" ("'Little Egypt' Tells" 4). Again we find here the pedestal and the pose for art's sake as themes, but we can also see how the descriptions of a harem and a slavery scenario begin to merge. The bracelets on the ankles evoke harem jewelry, but posing nude with bracelets as a 'little slave' also resonates with US American scenes at slave markets. While this link may be tentative, the interpretation of the same scene in *The Los Angeles Times* leaves no doubt about this association:

"He said he wanted me to do a little Egyptian pose on a pedestal as a slave, with shackles [instead of jewelry] on me in the six altogether" ("Filthy Facts" 3). Here I am not so interested in the fact that we cannot be sure what exactly Wabe herself had said in light of such varying reports, but rather that the variety of interpretations reflects how strongly American journalists already projected the American specters of slavery onto the harem scenario embodied by Wabe.

Wabe's performance and reception thus demonstrate that the specter of the harem and its associations with polygamy resonated with the suppressed cultural memory of sexual exploitation of female African American slaves, concubinage or even such specific practices as the *plaçage* system that allowed wealthy white men to maintain quadroon mistresses in New Orleans. The responses to Wabe's court appearance reveal that the popularity of harem scenarios in the United States is not just based on the projection of female vice overseas, but also on the resurfacing of repressed histories of black women's sexual exploitation in the United States. Wabe's embodied performance was a crucible that merged her own adaptations with the expectations of her agents and the public. Her harem scenario re-packages the desire for power over Other women in the image of harem slaves at the audiences' imagined disposal; however, the sexualized racial ambiguity in her bodily presence was also a projection screen for the lingering legacies of slavery. The possibility of such associations reveals the deeply palimpsestuous nature of adaptations— and, by extension, of embodied performances shaped by adaptive agency. Literally, a palimpsest refers to the medieval writing practice of erasing and layering new text on the same piece of paper. Such erasures where often imperfect, leaving traces of prior texts in the same space "interrupting and inhabiting each other" (Dillon 29). Sarah Dillon picks up on the theoretical, analytical power of a metaphorical reading of this "process of layering" (29) as erasing and re-writing are integral parts of fiction as well as of writing history itself. I read 'the harem,' and its various adaptations, as a

palimpsestuous site that not only acquires multiple layers of meaning that potentially interrupt each other through transcultural adaptations, but also through the racial ambiguity of the embodied performances in belly dancers like Ashea Wabe. Her adaptive agency—that is, her invocation of shackles, auction blocks and slave markets[24] as 'harems'—partially erases the 'orientalness' of harem layers, which makes its resonances with the histories of black women's exploitation even more visible. These troubling historical layers of meaning are subsumed under and co-inhabit US orientalist harem fantasies, which then allows Wabe to adapt them in her embodied performance of a harem scenario. Or rather, her embodied adaptive agency creates a node where such interruptions become visible. Wabe could thus enhance her self-promotion by materializing and reviving buried notions of domestic harems.

Harems as palimpsestuous sites also link the circulations of both black and oriental womanhood in another way. African American women activists, like Anna Julia Cooper, fought against the sexual exploitation of Southern black women arriving in Northern cities as part of the Great Migration. In doing so, as Helen Heran Jun points out, they deployed black orientalisms that adapted sexualized harems tropes of oriental women as harem slaves to emplace themselves as Americans in the Western side of the orientalist East/West binary, and to better their position within the US black/white racial binary. Cooper's 1892 essay "Womanhood A Vital Element In The Regeneration And Progress Of The Race," which refers to oriental harems to position black women as morally superior and fit for American citizenship, is a case in point. She claims that "In Oriental countries woman has been uniformly devoted to a life of ignorance, infamy, and complete stagnation" (9). She presents both "Mahomet" and the Koran as ignorant of women's needs, and

[24] This particular image is also prominently cited in the opening scenes of the 1921 *The Sheik* movie. Oriental women are showcased at a 'marriage auction' for male suitors to pick, staged as a slave market, and then taken as "chattel slaves" to serve and obey in the harem (*The Sheik*).

attributes a supposed lack of domesticity of oriental women to the nomadic lifestyle of 'Arabs.' She then continues:

> There was no hereafter, no paradise for her. The heaven of the Mussulman is peopled and made gladsome not by the departed wife, or sister, or mother, but by the *houri* — a figment of Mahomet's brain, partaking of the ethereal qualities of angels, yet imbued with all the vices and inanity of Oriental women. The harem here, and—'dust to dust' hereafter, this was the hope, the inspiration, the *summum bonum* of the Eastern woman's life! (10)

Cooper's vision of oriental women draws them as perpetually damned, serving in the harems here and in the "hereafter." Her black orientalist harem fantasies cast Arab women as seemingly angelic yet vicious, sexualized beings. In her attempt to fight the stereotype of the hypersexual black woman, Cooper thus adapts orientalist imaginations about hypersexual Arab women that even evoke the harem as a form of sexual slavery. Cooper does not couch her participation in the US imperialist gesture of projecting chattel slavery on to harem fantasies in nationalist or overtly racial terms, but religious ones. The religious binary between Christianity and Islam allows Cooper to claim a notion of superiority for Christian black women as Christian piety was a key tenant of True Womanhood. Encouraged by Christian cosmology, black slaves also often hoped to at least obtain freedom in the afterlife, a common trope in spirituals. Cooper denies oriental women even this possibility by painting them as eternal captives due to male and religious oppression.[25]

[25] Ironically, Cooper's emphasis on black women's Christian piety offers a point of convergence, rather than opposition, with Syrian American women's respectability politics. Both Syrian American proximity to whiteness and respectability derived from an emphasis on their piety as Christian women descending from the Holy Land. The analysis in chapter two will turn to a more detailed analysis of the intersections

On its flipside, though, Cooper's adaptive strategy of framing her case with harem references revives, rather than severs, the imaginary links between slavery and harem fantasies. Her emphasis on Southern black girls' sexual vulnerabilities inadvertently opens historical references to the South as a domestic Orient[26] —characterized by the harem-like situation of black female slaves and later mistresses living in concubinage with rich white men:

> Colored Girls of the South: -that large, bright, promising fatally beautiful class that stand shivering like a delicate plantlet before the fury of tempestuous elements, so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction; often without a father to (…) defend their honor with his life's blood; in the midst of pitfalls and snares, waylaid by the lower classes of white men, with no shelter… (24).

Even though Cooper only names the "lower classes" of white men as potential predators, the past and ongoing sexual vulnerability of Southern 'colored girls' has deep roots in the breeding paradigm of US chattel slavery as an institutionalized form of sexual exploitation. Historically slaveholders were mostly part of the richer, upper classes. Cooper's reference to lower classes can instead be as a strategic choice within respectability politics to confine vice to lack of morals and proper class behavior rather than race. In a palimpsestuous reading, however, her emphasis on past sexual exploitation also brings back associations with historic legacies of 'harem-like,'

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of religion and racial ambivalence in Syrian Americans' representations of womanhood, specifically to how the intellectual elites used similar orientalist references to oppressed Muslim women to distinguish themselves from Islam as the un-American element of imagined Arabness.

[26] For more on the cultural constructions of the South, in addition to Timothy Marr's conceptualization of the South specifically as a "domestic Orient" (147), Jennifer Greeson's *Our South* offers a comprehensive overview of how the South has functioned as the "*internal other* for the nation" (1) in the national body at large and Martyn Bone's *Where the New World Is* traces the historical entanglements of constructions of the South with transnational racial imaginaries.

institutional practices, such as the quadroon balls in New Orleans, that represent a microcosm for the construction of the South as a domestic orient: "the balls provided an opportunity for mixed-race women to form liaisons with wealthy white men through a system of concubinage known as *placage*" (Guillroy 68-9). The quadroon balls are among the closest historical approximations of material links between slavery and harem fantasies in institutionalized practices of concubinage in the US.

The balls began to be held in 1805 in New Orleans, parallel to the American military engagement with the Barbary coast. On a macro-level, orientalist imaginations offered a vocabulary to frame Southern slavery. The label 'Barbary' turned into a mobile sign for dangers of despotism that Northern Americans applied to the Southern slave states: for example, Benjamin Franklin called the South "a new Barbary rising in America" (Marr 141). On a local level, the quadroon balls themselves developed in an eerie spatial and metaphorical proximity between the auction block and the ballroom. Female slaves were paraded at the auction block for the potential sexual pleasure of masters. Quadroons at the balls were free, but they had to secure a living by entering into relationships with rich, white men. Some of these relationships were affectionate and stable, resembling polygamous marriages, but even in these cases survival still meant effectively selling their bodies (Guillroy 70). The balls resembled an upscale market place trading in the quadroons' fetishized 'superior beauty,' a notion that still resurfaces in Cooper's framing of the 'fatally beautiful' mulattas as a distinct class, and also re-appears in Wabe's performance of 'Little Egypt' as an attractive slave on display at an oriental harem/auction block. The racial ambivalence of mulattas and oriental belly dancers afforded them some agency in white society through their relative distance to blackness, but both were conceived of as a racialized threat to the white family structure as well (81). Even though there is a century between quadroon balls and belly dancing

performances, imagined miscegenation was likely another undercurrent that contributed to the fascination of white male audiences with harem fantasies and belly dancers. Such shows, even if just enjoyed as a spectacle, could nevertheless also substitute for the perceived loss of white, male dominion over black women's bodies. After Reconstruction the practices of the *placage* system, a 'domestic harem' that allowed white American males to enjoy semi-sanctioned polygamy, may have been a faint memory; however, the resurgence of chattel slavery associations in harem fantasies around 1900 reveals the deep entanglements of racialized desires for both black and oriental women which have not been entirely erased.

In terms of Cooper's respectability politics and Wabe's embodied performances, the harem scenario as a palimpsest functions in two ways. Cooper's invocation of the 'fatally beautiful class' cannot fully erase the associations of black concubinage with polygamy, even if she seeks to position black women in opposition to oriental harems. This interruption, however, does not just simply engage in a replacement paradigm between black and oriental women. The associative links between chattel slavery and harems, materialized in Wabe's embodied performances, may interrupt Cooper's attempts at black respectability and cater to Wabe's self-promotion, but they also make it impossible to fully silence these horrific historical legacies. The enormous popularity of belly dancing and harem fantasies throughout the 20th century in US mass culture thus also harbors the potential for a critical reading of how orientalist and racist fantasies shape hegemonic, white culture. For the public sphere at large, however, Wabe's individual embodiment of a harem scenario and her adaptive agency had opened up, or at least galvanized, the possibility of an increasing displacement of US chattel slavery onto oriental harems within twentieth century US Orientalisms. Wabe, as a prominent belly dancer, had direct access to cultural agency through her public performances. The next section turns to a different set of archival material, family

photography, as a semi-public medium that registered the embodied self-representation of middle-class Syrian American women. Belly dancers like Wabe would not be directly associated with Syrian American immigrants, but I argue that the above-mentioned intrinsic links between respectability and racial politics included associations with harem fantasies for Syrian American women immigrants.

The Syrian American Family Portrait

Photography and visual culture in the US are intimately linked to the production of race and gender, intersecting with ideals of family and nation (Wexler 376). The intertwined histories of photography, race, gender and ethnic self-representation situate photography as a highly ambivalent site for knowledge production and identity formation. Photography as a medium establishes power hierarchies through a hegemony of the white, male gaze, but it is also a means of self-representation for women/marginalized groups—enabling and subjugating at the same time. While minstrelsy was a dominant genre that shaped public perceptions of blackness, African Americans always resisted its visual politics. The emergence of studio photography in the nineteenth century offered access to new modes of public self-representation to this end. Different immigrant communities and African Americans used self-portraits or calling cards to take control over their public images, Frederick Douglass' 160 self-portraits perhaps being the most prominent case. Zoe Trodd discovered that Frederick Douglass was in fact the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, achieving visual fame at a time when blackness was otherwise denigrated. Douglass adapted his portraits over time to the changing political causes of the African American community during and after the end of slavery, but in all portraits, "from the first photograph in 1841 to the last in 1894, he used photography to argue *against* racial oppression and

for Black equality by positioning himself as more dignified, elegant and frequently represented than any of the white citizens who tried to express and establish middle-class identity via photographic portraits" (130). Trodd defines his photographic self-representation thus as part of the "first great visual battles in US history: between racist stereotypes and dignified self-possession" (130).

Syrian American immigrants, arriving after the 1890s, entered this visual battle with different stakes, but similar strategies. To access the benefits of US citizenship, legally and culturally, they had to refute racial stereotypes and assert their compatibility with national norms of middle-class respectability—women and representations of womanhood were central in both respects. On the one hand, US orientalist perceptions of imagined Arab womanhood were dominated by harem fantasies, the opposite of respectability. On the other, historically Syrian American women as immigrants often joined the public workforce. Thus, like most African American working-class women, they did not adhere to white middle-class ideals of domesticity and the public at large regarded them as threats to the family (Gualtieri, *Between* 139-41). It is thus perhaps not surprising that the earliest archival traces of Syrian American women in the US are often family portraits. Embodied self-representation through such photographs allowed women to present themselves as respectable, middle-class mothers and I read the Syrian American women's adaptive agency in staging such family portraits as a strategic affinity to the legacies of African American women's respectability politics.

Family photography is a specific genre and a social process that engages with widely legible codes of patriarchal and nationalist middle-class norms (Wexler 368). As a social practice, family portraits do not just reflect genre conventions and political contexts, they also offer an avenue for adaptive agency via embodied self-representation: "when we photograph ourselves in

a familial setting, we do not do so in a vacuum; we respond to dominant mythologies of family life, to conceptions we have inherited, to images we see on television, in advertising, in film" (Hirsch xvi). Gillian Rose further emphasizes that beyond the indexicality of the photograph itself, its meaning is equally shaped by the social processes that accompany the production and distribution of such photographs. In contrast to Wabe's official, promotional pictures, publicly circulated in newspapers, family portraits were shot and circulated in intimate public spheres. In immigrant communities, such as the Syrian diaspora, intimate public spheres could span across the Atlantic, when family pictures were sent back and forth, but they also may have established women's cultural agency in the domestic community formation. In light of the lack of archival material documenting this agency, we have to read for the simultaneous absences and presences *produced* by Syrian American family photographs. Rose notes that the production, selection, storing and showing of family photographs was often (an unseen) part of women's cultural labor, carried by emotional attachment to family members *and* the desire to present themselves as good mothers. Family photography as a process thus carried "a trace of the people they picture," as well as "traces of unseen others" (128)—that is, the cultural agency of women in establishing and shaping the family archive.

Rose's contemporary case studies in *Doing Family Photography* revolve around white, middle-class women, but her work has direct implications for my archival study of early Syrian American family photography as well. On a material level, the archival absence of Syrian American women (and specifically, women in the workforce) becomes glaringly obvious considering their photographic presence in family portraits. It is important to note for my analysis here that the available material only allows limited insight into the processes of production and reception, but I will return at the end of this section to the recent changes in reception environments

of Syrian American family portraits through archival online collections. The fact that every photograph produces absences and presences beyond the immediate content of the picture, though, theoretically links my study of women's possibilities for embodied adaptive agency in photography to performances, racial representations and the trans-medial mobility of scenarios. The structural doubleness of embodiment and replacement on a stage is not unlike the production of present and absent subjects in photography. Furthermore, for Syrian American family portraits, this doubleness applies not just to women's invisible roles in the archival process, but also to their racial ambivalence—their simultaneous proximity to and distance from whiteness. I argue that Syrian American women curated their photographic presences, via adaptive agency in embodied self-representation, to replace racializing associations of Syrianness with harem fantasies, oriental Otherness and ethnic Othering of Syrians as undesirable/unfit immigrants. The side of reception in this process is not fixed or determined; I further hypothesize that representations of respectable Syrian American womanhood in family portraits, in their attempts at replacement, could confirm and make these very tropes present again for Anglo American viewers. The following section shows how closely harem fantasies were linked to Syrian immigrant womanhood and that Syrian American women's adaptation of repertoires of respectability may very well have been a response to the 'flattening image of the dancing girl.'

Midway Types

The Chicago World Fair engaged heavily in documenting, and thus producing, the representations of 'ethnic types' from all over the world in their catalogues. These representations included ethnographic portraits of Syrian women. The American Engraving Company, based in Chicago, published *Midway Types. A Book of Illustrated Lessons about The People of the Midway Plaisance World's Fair 1893* in 1894. These illustrated lessons featured many different types of

'oriental' women. The portraits of Syrian women were often linked to US orientalist Holy Land tropes, and they stood side by side with portraits of belly dancers, harem belles or heavily veiled women.

Figure 3. *A Harem Belle* and Figure 4. *Mary of Bethlehem*
Arab American National Museum, Suleiman Collection, *Midway Types*

The portraits of belly dancers ranged from representations of Persian, Turkish and Algerian to Egyptian women, often staged as *An Oriental Type of Beauty* or *A Harem Belle* (see fig. 3), while Holy Land references usually depicted women from the Mount Lebanon region. Portraits of, for example, *Mary of Bethlehem* (fig. 4) did not explicitly label these women as Syrian, but they engaged in the orientalist craze for recovering access to the origins of Christianity as another kind of gaze and control. For example, the portrait of "Mary" with a baby is represented as a rare type in opposition to the other elements of the "wickedest street" of the Fair (fig. 4).

Most of the explanatory notes (page numbers are unfortunately not available) under the images function as an extension of the ethnographic gaze of the Fair's visitors. The narrator's voice evokes a classic orientalist harem scenario. The descriptions revel in orientalist fantasies of mysterious and sexually appealing, veiled women, who are "jealously guarded" by their male companions. The visitors thus have to engage in self-conscious acts of looking, taking back tent flaps and other kinds of veils to behold the embodied presence of oriental women. The book even includes a photo of the camel rides that allowed visitors to explore the Cairo Street as ethnographic explorers. The agenda of this publication is barely hidden, and the explicit racializing of its photographic subjects highlights the ambivalent discursive framing of Syrian women as potentially respectable, Christian women who nevertheless are situated in relation to the US racial imaginary and harem fantasies.

The first picture of two women explicitly framed as Syrian women appears in the catalogue opposite an image of a fully veiled Egyptian girl. The text under the latter image notes that visitors of the Cairo Street "went wild with delight" at the sight of veiled women who were "masked beyond recognition" (fig. 5). On the opposite page, the text under the staged portrait of *Syrian Women* introduces them as follows:

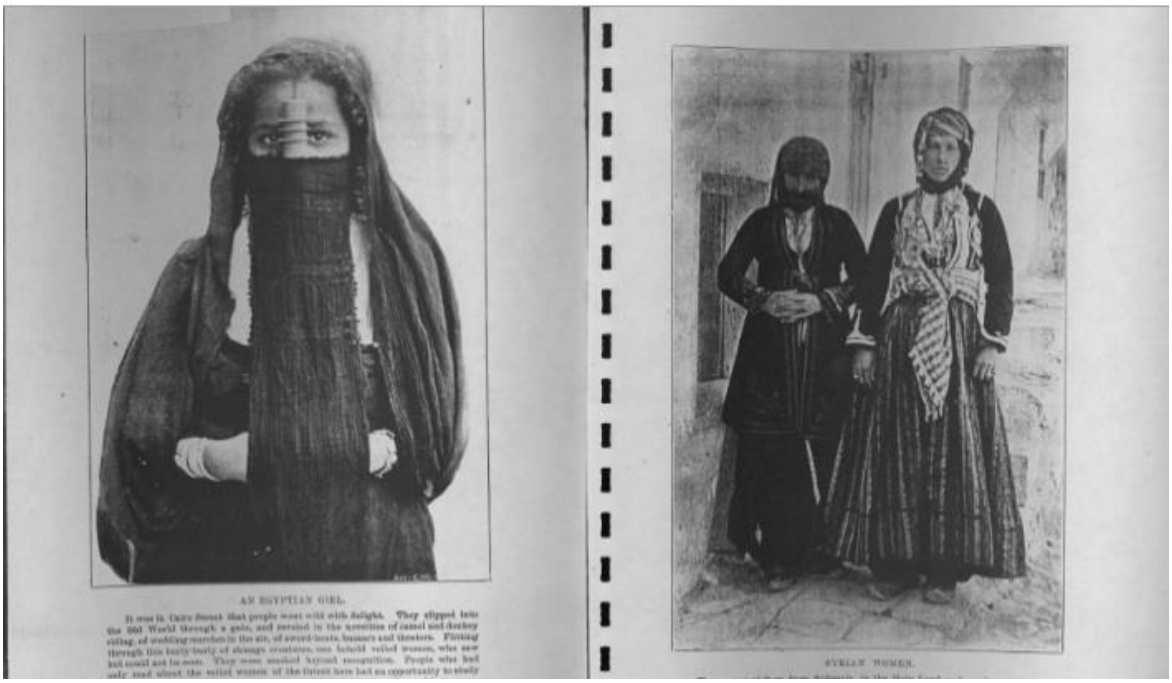

Figure 5. *An Egyptian Girl* and Figure 6. *Syrian Women*, in *Midway Types*

> These were visitors from Sydenaia, in the Holy Land, and members of one of the Turkish colonies on the Midway. Their costumes were a subject of study, being diversified by high colors and bedecked with all sorts of jewelry. It will be noted that the fashion of going veiled is not as closely observed as in olden times and that while one women has her face covered the other is entirely unveiled (fig. 6).

As Ottoman subjects Syrian women appeared on Constantinople Street, but they were clearly differentiated from other representations of Turkish women. The quote above is striking in two ways. First, it affirms the discursive links between Syrianness and the Holy Land. Second, it focuses on the women's attire, and the viewers' fascination with the women's colorful costume and jewelry also relates these Syrian women to the specters of harem fantasies, even though their staged representation does not explicitly engage in a harem scenario. As Syrian, these two women

are literally staged in between these two dominant strands of US orientalist fantasies, but they are also perceived as an embodied representation of the modern/primitive binary underlying a Western colonial gaze. Both women seem to wear some kind of head dress, but the degrees of veiling are explicitly aligned with the women's access to 'modernity.' From an orientalist perspective, this attests to the capability of Syrian women 'emancipating' themselves and adapting Western performative codes of respectable womanhood, as one woman is considered to be "entirely unveiled." And yet, as the other woman covers her head, Syrian womanhood can also represent 'tradition.' This not only confirms orientalist perceptions of veiling as backward and oppressive, but also situates these women as traditionalist immigrants who have not yet 'ascended' into US American culture. I will return to the relevance of these specific intersections for the Syrian American community in chapter two.

Figure 7. *Types From Mount Lebanon* and Figure 8. *A Syrian Beauty*, in *Midway Types*

A second page dedicated to Syrian women juxtaposes *The Types from Mount Lebanon* (fig. 7) and *A Syrian Beauty* (fig. 8) Here the descriptions relate Syrian-Lebanese women even more directly to racial and gendered US frames. *The Types From Mount Lebanon* are introduced with the following text:

> These are not pictures of American Indians, as might be supposed at first glance, but sturdy peasants—mother, daughter, and granddaughter—from the country at the foot of Mount Lebanon. Everybody and everything from the Land of Christ had an effective influence upon the minds of most of the Midway visitors and these sour looking people were regarded as pleasant reminders of the Holy Land and studied as such representatives. Their costumes, with all the inartistic fineries of their class, are worth more than the study of the moment. These three Midway Types, rugged and uncouth as they seem, represented people whose ancestors helped to make the sacred history and without whom the Fair would have been deficient of essential rare-types (fig. 7).

The "types" from Mount Lebanon are immediately racialized, both in terms of their "inartistic" costumes and by invoking the US orientalist conflation of Native Americans with oriental savages.[27] The women's attire is traditional, but not in a typical, orientalist harem fashion. The embroidered skirts and headdress of these "peasant" women could vaguely invoke visual

[27] As pointed out in the introduction, Schueller identifies the linkage between Native Americans' and North Africans' supposed savagery as a dual—domestic and international—threat to the emerging US nation-state in the early 1800s as one of the earliest US orientalist tropes. This trope far precedes the typical harem or Holy Land fantasies in circulation around the 1900s and it is remarkable that this older layer of the earliest US Orientalisms interrupts the racialized framing of Syrian-Lebanese women in a catalogue dedicated to sexually exoticized oriental women.

associations with Native American dress. In terms of representing alterity, the material differences in Native and Syrian rural dress matter little to the editors of this catalogue, as this conflation of class and race develops a different kind of oriental 'backwardness.' These women could not be easily racialized as 'types' via sexualized specters of harems and associations with black womanhoods, but as Native/peasant women they evoked primitive Otherness exotic enough to merit inclusion in *The Midway Types*.

By contrast, the so-called Syrian Beauty's embodied presence on the opposite page visually represents proximity to whiteness (fig. 8). Staging and lighting play a key role here. The image of the women from Mount Lebanon is deliberately staged to make the family—or this 'tribe' of women—appear darker than the 'Syrian beauty' on the opposite page. The lighting comes from behind, so that their faces and the visible skin appear 'not quite white.' The 'Syrian Beauty's' face is fully lit, and she asserts a self-confident posture as she gazes off into the distance with a coy smile. Her traditional dress is at the same time respectable, or at least not tied to harem fantasies, but also revealing in its loose cut at the upper body. The commentary revolves around both her voluptuous figure and maternal aura. This woman is explicitly framed as "a Syrian mother who captivated all the lean Turks on Constantinople Street, and was, notwithstanding her motherhood, the belle of that Oriental quarter" (fig. 8). This is a striking shift in frames. The focus on motherhood indicates a potential association of Syrian womanhood with the ideals of True Womanhood, or at the very least with middle-class respectability compatible with US normative views of gender. However, as an 'oriental belle' her body is clearly sexualized in this maternal frame, which cannot entirely dissociate her from the specters of harem fantasies. Even the very categorization of "belle" in this catalogue is linked to the above-mentioned array of harem belles. This seeming contradiction in the framing of Syrian women as located between

asexual/respectable motherhood and oriental sexual appeal is pushed further in the remaining commentary:

> Pleasant featured, stout and jolly, she was as impressive a type of womankind as one could find from one end of the Midway to the other, and would have been, physically, a regal appearing matron for the finest houses of any of the city avenues. Her nativity was rather against her social success at the Exposition, and she has returned to the obscurity of her Mount Lebanon home unhonored and unsung (fig. 8).

The qualifier of only appearing "physically" to be respectable is telling. She may be close to imagined whiteness and represent a shared ancestry through her Christian pedigree, but the qualifier 'physically' indicates that the commentary after all does not consider her fully compatible with Americanness, either mentally or culturally.

This ambivalence foreshadows the Syrian American community's struggles for racial and cultural inclusion in the early twentieth century, but also helps to explain why respectability politics would be central to the struggles for identity of Syrian American female immigrants over the next few decades. The commentary explicitly invokes the potential of this Syrian woman to represent the finest houses in the city; that is, potential to be compatible with white, middle-class respectability. And it is not entirely clear how exactly her "nativity" holds her back. The editor could refer here to either racial discrimination against her based on her ethnic status as Syrian woman in the US, or to social restrictions from within the Syrian community that could have prevented her "social success." In either case, these portraits and commentaries reflect how Syrian

women as "types" were staged as a kind of middle ground between orientalist fantasies and respectable potential citizens. *The Midway Types* catalogue thus exemplifies the racially ambivalent discursive landscape Syrian women encountered upon arrival in the US, which would have also shaped the contemporaneous reception of their family portraits. The example of the 'Syrian Beauty' indicates that, for Anglo American viewers, Syrian whiteness/respectability was never stable and always interspersed with sexualizing and racializing associations to Syrian Americans as *oriental* immigrants.

Repertoires of Respectability

African American respectability politics specifically disrupted the notion of black women's innate promiscuity, so often used to justify rape and sexual exploitation during slavery. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's original conception of respectability politics looked at agency and self-representation in the activism of black Baptist churchwomen between 1900 and 1920. Black Baptist women inverted racial prejudice, casting themselves as missionaries, gifted with what W.E.B. DuBois called "second sight" (2), who set out to reform misguided racial perceptions in American society. During the Great Migration and Jim Crow, these churchwomen fought stereotypes of black women as weak teachers, immoral mothers, infidel wives and generally unclean. To counter such associations, the churchwomen drew widely legible legitimacy as worthy American women by adapting discourses of the Bible, the Constitution, Victorian ideologies and racial self-help literature.

African American women's assertion of respectability cut deep into the exclusionary structures of white supremacy and was inevitably political as it revealed its socially constructed nature. The representation of the right kind of morals was a weapon against racism, a means of self-protection and a way to win white allies. On its flipside, however, black respectability politics

was a form of assimilation that not only required conformity with constructions of white, middle-class normalcy, but also either obscured or policed the behavior of working class black communities as well (Higginbotham 185-7). Idealized projections of Blackness, in the end, also obscured alternative histories of African American activisms that challenged white supremacy and other ways of affirming working-class African American sensibilities (Gray 194). Self-representation according to white, middle-class 'American' "manners and morals" (Higgins Botham 194) was thus in itself a highly ambivalent act that could confirm and contest the white supremacist gaze at the same time. Respectability politics were a defense mechanism, but also "a form of gatekeeping that skirted issues of patriarchy, class, colorism, and sexual difference" (Fackler 272). According to Katharina Fackler, the very effectiveness of respectability politics nevertheless rests on "its ambivalence, as it challenged racial hierarchies but was predicated on the logic of dominant middle-class gender roles" (274).

Respectability politics are intimately related to adaptive agency and racial performativity. Adaptive agency is one of the strategies that facilitate the assertion of respectability but shifts the analytical attention more to the semi-conscious choices women reflect through embodied self-representation. 'Manners and morals' emerge out of repeated and recognizable gestures, positions, clothes or behavioral choices that transfer the meaning of respectability as a performative repertoire. In the US racial context, this repertoire of respectability developed a scenario of Anglo American, middle-class femininity—the embodied manifestations of the True Womanhood trope—as an active production of whiteness as the national norm in the nineteenth century.[28] While such scenarios would have been enacted mostly in domestic spaces, photography, in addition to

[28] The turn to the twentieth century and anxieties about modernity increasingly challenged to normative repertories of respectable womanhood, albeit not their racial politics. Chapter two will turn to the implications of the emerging trope of New Womanhood for Syrian American self-representation.

literature and other media, was a means of disseminating and solidifying the underlying repertoires in the public sphere. As soon as photographs became more widely available to the general public via daguerreotypes in the mid-nineteenth century, African American women "used this new media form to picture freedom, to image and imagine people of African descent as self-possessed and divorced from slavery" (Cobb 3) as well.

Jasmine Cobb's *Picture Freedom* traces how African American women used conventions of white women's print culture to re-construct black visuality, disrupting the racial politics that excluded black women conceptually from domesticity through their physical presence and adaptation of what Cobb calls the "optics of respectability" (70) in friendship albums and other kinds of photography. Cobb theorizes respectability as a visual discourse that developed an early form of black feminist spectatorship. The production and circulation of albums among middle-class African American women was not a simple adoption of hegemonic notions of respectability, but a selective adaptation and construction of free black womanhood as distinct from the hypersexualized slavery stereotypes. Fackler's research shows that the stakes of respectability continued to shape African American visual politics up to civil rights era photography in the 1960s. She terms such recurring, and thus recognizable, visual codes of respectability in photographs the "iconography of respectability politics" (272). It is discernible through women's physical presence in "attire—coat, dress, purse, glasses, neat hairdo" (274), as well as through the posture, the gaze, and the placement of the body in relation to the available space, or facial expressions in photographs (274-5). I build on both Cobb's and Fackler's work, but rather than emphasizing the visual primacy of optics and iconographies, I conceptualize respectability as a performative repertoire to trace multi-ethnic perspectives and interracial affinities in such embodied practices of self-representation.

Figure 9. *Cory Family Portrait*, circa 1890s. Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

This portrait of the Syrian American Cory family, collected by Alixa Naff and stored in the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection at the Smithsonian, dates to the 1890s and is thus among the earliest available Syrian American family portraits. This family portrait, as a form of semi-public self-representation via photography, performs Syrian American compatibility with white, middle-class Americanness by drawing on recognizable elements in the repertoire of

respectability. The mother is the focal point of the image and all members of the family wear American, middle-class attire. The mother and the daughter display both dresses and overcoats that do not have the faintest orientalist appeal. The mother's hairdo and her placement on a majestic chair even seem to invoke the manners of aristocratic family portraits, while the choice of suits for the father and one of the sons is decidedly bourgeois. The father stands in the background, which could be read as a position of power watching over "his" family. However, it is the mother's gaze that commands attention. Her place at the center of the family is not uncommon in a patriarchal frame that defines women's value primarily via motherhood, and her assertive gaze and firm grip on the hand of her younger son exude power as the center of the family. The attire, setting and postures denote an upper-class status. Through adaptive agency this family can emplace themselves in a white, middle-class scenario of the bourgeois family, but the ambivalence inherent in respectability politics also frames the Syrian American case. The Cory[29] family's ability to claim respectability via adaptive agency reveals the constructedness of white supremacy, just like African American women's respectability politics qua Cobb and Fackler; however, Syrian American families sought primarily inclusion into existing hierarchies, even if they inadvertently destabilized its exclusionary premises.

The specific case of Syrian American racial ambivalence, even proximity to whiteness, makes the role of race less apparent, at least at first glance. I argue, though, that the very focus on family and the respectability of Syrian American women as mothers in these photographs is a counter discourse to the presumed 'inability' of Syrian women to preside over the "finest houses in the city" (fig. 8). As we have seen, *The Midway Types* framed the 'Syrian Beauty' as theoretically capable, but in practice not 'successful' in fulfilling their potential for respectability

[29] It is further likely that the name 'Cory' was an Americanized version of the common Syrian-Lebanese last name 'Khouri.'

in the US. What is more, Syrian American women frequently worked in the public sphere, either in factories or on the road as peddlers. This breech with traditional gender roles was mostly driven by economic needs and challenged a sense of family honor among the Syrian immigrants as well as US perceptions of domestic middle-class womanhood (Khater 181). Despite Syrian American proximity to whiteness, the women's presumed lack of domesticity placed Syrian American families in relation to the trope of the 'dysfunctional family' applied to exclude African American *and* immigrant families from norms of respectable, middle-class Americanness. A conceptualization of respectability as a repertoire can capture such interracial affinities, beyond the black/white paradigm, in that Syrian and African American women's performative adaptive agency via embodied self-representation used similar strategies of emplacement in respectability.

Syrian American family portraits are a specific case that reflects intersections between African American and immigrant women's self-representation in US racial formation. With the rise of eugenicist thinking in response to European mass migration after the 1890s, any discussion of motherhood became entangled with race and nation. The domestic, white woman's body and reproductivity within 'American' families was supposed to guarantee the 'racial health' of the nation, and these concerns inevitably linked anxieties about the stereotypical hypersexuality of black women with the imagined hyperfertility of immigrant motherhood. Nativist narratives thus feared a 'dysfunctional' immigrant family, which anticipates rising sociological concerns with 'dysfunctional' African American families during the 1920s and 1930s (that would culminate in the infamous Moynihan Report in 1965). In this perspective, mothers are held responsible for the failing of families, and "normative notions of middle-class femininity and morality converge with the race-family equation to construct both the immigrant and the African-American woman as deleterious to the health of the nation" (Irving 14). The racialization of African and Syrian

American women was not identical, but the trope of the dysfunctional family turned respectability politics into an important tool for self-representation for both communities. Family and embodied gender roles, and the everyday aspects of life, including "clothes, language and accents, food and social habits become measures of their Otherness" (Khater 14). Family portraits were thus a useful medium to engage with, and 'correct,' the racialized perceptions of Syrianness in the US public sphere.

Departing from this case study, I am interested in exploring how Syrian American respectability politics did not function only as an aspiration toward whiteness. I hypothesize that the eminent adaptability of the repertoire of respectability across racial lines could trigger unexpected affinities in a multi-ethnic US context. Higginbotham mentions that the idea of distinctive American morals and manners can be mobilized as a common ground for 'American lives' and transcend racial boundaries. She also hints at the possibility that respectability may also challenge race prejudice targeting Asian and other immigrants, though she does not fully develop this relational approach (189-90).[30] Recent scholarship on contemporary respectability politics engages with the ways "respectability politics have been persistently elaborated through cross-racial juxtapositions" (Collins-White et.al. 466).

On a very basic level, then, a multi-ethnic approach to respectability politics precludes a black/Arab competition paradigm that often shapes scholarship on early Syrian immigration (Pickens; Gualtieri, *Between*). On the one hand, the adaptation of the visual codes that denote white

[30] I fully agree with Higginbotham that the singular status of anti-black racism, facing the legacies of slavery through Jim Crow laws in the South and housing, social and job discrimination in the North, constitute a unique context. My analysis of affinities and relations does not equate African and Syrian American experiences. However, my relational approach to Syrian American women as oriental immigrants builds on Michelle Hartman, who argues that all racially marked communities in the US, even though they may trouble the black/white binary, nevertheless define themselves in relation to blackness, either by affiliation or by distancing (147).

women's respectability diminishes "Black visibility" (Fackler 273) for African Americans. On the other hand, the appearance of such conformity, the display of "propriety, restrained religiosity, family values, and traditional gender roles, often served as a common denominator that helped unify divided factions" (272) within the community as well. Both these unifying capabilities and the contribution to ethnic invisibility apply to other ethnic groups that adapt respectability politics in a US context as well. Despite its ambivalent relationship to white norms, respectability politics also deconstructs predetermined racial positions by diminishing ethnic specificity. This kind of adaptive agency then connects, rather than separates, Syrian and African American women. Reading the repertoire of respectability as a multi-ethnic practice thus allows a relational, rather than oppositional, analysis of Syrian American women's self-representation negotiating frames of both immigrant and black/white womanhood.

Such a multi-ethnic perspective includes other immigrant communities' self-representations as well, beyond the Syrian/African American comparison: within the scope of this chapter, I point here briefly to the relationship between Syrian American family portraits and the histories of Chinese American self-portraits for immigration purposes. While the Chinese American experience is only one example of how the histories of photography and visual culture produced immigrants as racial subjects, it is a central one (Pegler-Gordon 10-12). Chinese labor immigration was the driving force behind what Lisa Lowe called "Immigrant Acts" (*Immigrant* 7), the enactments of racialized immigration restrictions from 1875 up until 1965. Anti-Asian sentiments are inherently contradictory as a Chinese American labor force sustained US industries, while their legal and cultural exclusion created an immigrant Other that facilitated a vision of national homogeneity. Chinese women only started to immigrate to the US in larger numbers after 1965 (159-62), but the racialized constructions of Chinese undesirability were heavily gendered

from the beginning of immigration restrictions, even preceding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Its precursor, the 1875 Page Act, targeted prostitutes, coolies and criminals, which mostly affected Chinese women (Pegler-Gordon 2). Chinese men and women were linked to ideas of immorality, undermining the imagined white, national body through prostitution. The construction of Chinese sexual vice is yet again specifically racialized, but the supposed lack in Chinese women's respectability feeds into the general idea of unassimilability and undesirability of immigrants at large.

ID photography and medical inspections were central to the establishment of a visual regime of immigration controls, but also here photography offered both a means of domination and subversion. Anthony Lee demonstrates how Chinese American laborers enjoyed staging various kinds of self-portraits and calling cards in the booming era of studio photography during Reconstruction, playing with photographic conventions addressed to American and Han sensibilities as well as varying racial codes (248-53). After Exclusion, "paper sons" and other forms of manipulated photographic evidence of familial connections offered a way to circumvent the Chinese Exclusion Act via family reunifications (Pegler-Gordon 44-50). In these kinds of photographic self-representation, the assertion of respectability played a central role to denounce the charge that Chinese immigrants were unassimilable to Americanness and thus undesirable. Chinese and Syrian American communities had very different experiences and relations to immigration restrictions, but elite members of both groups challenged exclusions based on racial criteria in US court rooms, and photographic evidence of respectability and 'fitness'/desirability for US citizenship would have been important in either case. As so often when it comes to representations of womanhood as expressions of ethnic/national ideals, Chinese women in these photographs were held to represent traditional culture. They used Chinese attire and upper-class

settings to prove their respectability in the hope that a credible renunciation of any links with immorality or prostitution would help them to obtain exemptions from the Exclusion Act (57-8). In many ways, this strategy of self-representation performs an auto-orientalist form of adaptive agency that we could also expect to see among early Syrian American women immigrants keen to prove themselves worthy of US citizenship. However, the opposite seems to be the case. Chinese and Syrian women both had to contend with hyper-sexualized associations in the US, but why did middle-class Syrian American women choose to forgo the embodiments of 'Syrian' traditions to claim respectability?

The sexualization of oriental women writ large, at the intersections of US Orientalism and racial imaginaries, applied to both imagined Chinese and Arab womanhood. However, there are crucial differences in how these sexualized stigmas intersected with the imagined racialization of Arab oriental versus Chinese oriental womanhoods. Imagined Arab womanhood centers on harems and veils; 'Far Eastern' Orientalisms are focused more on bound feet as emblems of Chinese women's domestic confinement and oppression. The relative power of sexually confident women in harem fantasies must have been perceived as far more threatening to the values of True Womanhood than bound feet; as Pegler-Gordon notes, some Chinese women even deliberately foreground their feet as status symbols to appeal to a Western perception of oppressed, but sexually confined and thus respectable, Chinese womanhood (57). Another key difference is that Chinese women were not afforded any degree of racial ambivalence. Syrian immigrants could pass, which would have been another factor that allowed them to avoid auto-Orientalism in favor of the repertoire of white, middle-class respectability in their public self-representation. The following

comparison of Syrian American family portraits before and after emigration further visualizes the shift in these portraits from 'Syrian' to 'US' style respectability politics.

Figure 10. *Katool family*, Mt. Lebanon, 1898, AANM Online Collection

Figure 11. *Jamail family*, 1910, AANM Online Collection

Figure 12. *Gormanous family*, 1915, AANM Online Collection

These three photographs are taken from Family History Archive of Syrian and Lebanese Families in the American South, the result of an ongoing collaboration between the Arab American National Museum and participants at the annual conventions of Southern Federation of Syrian-Lebanese American Clubs. The museum started collecting oral histories and family photographs in 2014 and continues to publish its constantly evolving collection online. Some of the donated family portraits date back to the 1890s and 1910s, recording different embodied performances of repertoires of respectability. While the basic set-up in all three photographs is similar, featuring the mother and father at the center of the image amidst their children, the choice of attire differs starkly. The portrait of the Katool family predates emigration, as it was taken in 1898 in the Deir Chwah region of Mt. Lebanon. The Katools present themselves in local clothes. Both mother and father wear headscarves, and it is notable that especially the father wears 'oriental' pants and shoes. The women's dresses appear closer to a generic Western style, and the children do not display a specific garment coded as oriental at all.

The other two photographs from the Jamail and Gormanous families feature the typical scenarios of US middle-class respectability in their attire. The Gormanous seem to even invoke Southern-specific codes, staging themselves with a white umbrella next to a rattan chair. Syrian-Lebanese Americans in the US South were a middle-men minority that traded with both white and black communities (Thomas 176). While early Lebanese pack peddlers in the South appear to have shared a sense of oppression and exclusion with their African American customers, their economic success would soon move them closer to the white side of the color line. [31] The family portraits of

[31] James Thomas' research on the lives of early Lebanese pack peddlers in Mississippi suggests that these working-class Lebanese had a special relationship to their black customers. Encounters with African Americans through business transactions helped them not only financially, but also culturally in terms of assimilation as newly arrived immigrants. The more successful Lebanese Americans become, the further they distanced themselves from black communities. When the first generation of peddlers began to settle down and to open stores in the 1920s, they continued to cater to black customers, but they settled in multi-

the Lebanese Americans above indicate that the economically more established members of these early immigrant communities sought inclusion into imagined, white, middle-class Americanness directly. This indicates that Syrian American respectability politics, just like the African American equivalent,[32] was also reserved for middle- to upper-classes and possibly functioned as a form of gatekeeping for which kinds of images about Syrianness could circulate in the US public sphere.

While all three portraits aspire to represent respectable families, the difference between the Syrian and the Syrian American portraits indicates that 'Arab' oriental attire could not represent respectability in a US context. The traditional, yet not orientalist, attire of Mrs. Katool is also another case in point that orientalist fantasies about imagined Arab womanhood did not correspond to the material lives and experiences of Arab women. The choice of 'Western' clothes in the latter portraits is undoubtedly a performance of class and social status, and one may speculate about a transnational circulation of Western codes for respectable/modern clothing, and that these families understood the association of any kind of 'orientally' inflected garment with harem fantasies would have been strong and potentially compromising—especially for women. As Matthew Stiffler's research shows, early Syrian American businesses and church functions deliberately used self-orientalizing displays in their advertisements and self-representation to wider communities, but personal racial and gendered body politics are clearly a different matter. Adaptive agency in the

ethnic communities together with other not-quite immigrants, mostly Italian and Jewish Americans. Growing Nativism and exclusion from white-only clubs always reminded these Syrian-Lebanese Americans that they were not considered fully white and the threat of lynching was never far from sight. So despite their ascent in class and increasing proximity to whiteness, claims to respectability were central to these communities to guarantee personal safety and to increase business prospects within white communities in the Jim Crow South (182-4).

[32] Black respectability politics was largely an upper-class phenomenon, linked to Du Bois' notion of the talented tenth and racial uplift (Gray 193), and this applies to the available traces of Syrian American respectability politics as well. It is important to note that the family portraits analyzed in this chapter, or the documentation of women's journalism and club organizing assessed in the following chapters, do not represent Syrian American working-class realities, and that they project an idealized version of Syrianness as well.

service of the Syrian American quest for citizenship and proximity to whiteness, exemplified here through embodied self-representation in family photography, had to denounce any possible links to orientalist Arab womanhood. As an immigrant community that still had to fight for access to legal citizenship before 1915, specifically by proving their 'non-Asianness', it is further notable that women's embodied performances of respectability had to adapt Western repertoires only. While upper-class Chinese women seeking immigration could resort to traditional attire to ward off sexualized, orientalist associations, middle-class Syrian American women could not.[33]

Finally, we might read both gestures—the Chinese American claim for respectability via auto-Orientalism and Syrian American women's adaptation of the US repertoire of respectability––in relation to imagined black womanhood. Using US orientalist imaginations of traditional Chinese womanhood to denote respectability also distanced Chinese American women from perceived black immorality, but this avenue would not have been possible for adaptations of imagined Arab womanhood. As Ashea Wabe's case shows, belly dancing and harem scenarios actively merged Orientalisms with sexualized stereotypes about black womanhood. While Syrian American women may not have responded directly to harem stereotypes, the notions of (black/oriental) hypersexuality/ (immigrant) hyperfertility merge in the specter of the dysfunctional family, and Syrian American women's adaptive agency in family portraits arguably

[33] Syrian American respectability politics engages with, and also by default undermines, the imperial home/harem binary, just as African American women's respectability politics upsets the black/white binary. In her book on *Home and Harem*, a precursor to Grewal's conception of nodes and connectivities in transnational flows, Grewal looks at the conceptions of homes and harems in the British empire as intimately linked, spatial, metaphorical constructions. The imagination of England as 'home' and of Indian 'harems' overseas were not two discrete discursive operates, but inherently linked, collapsing into each other. Women's bodies, for example, the juxtaposition of English suffragettes and Indian women, facilitate these flows: "Both 'home' and 'harem' are, I argue, relational, nationalist constructs that require the deployment of women and female bodies within the antagonistic and comparative framework of colonial epistemology" (5). I argue that Syrian American women's embodiment of explicitly 'non-oriental' respectability produces a spatial, metaphorical construction of respectable homes/womanhoods that collapses the inherent antagonism built into colonial constructions of the East/West.

resisted this racializing stereotype. If we accept this hypothesis, then we cannot read Syrian American respectability politics only as a gesture of distancing to blackness in order to ascend into whiteness. Representations of proper families and respectable womanhood were also an area of perhaps unintended, but visually palpable, strategic affinity between black and Syrian American women's adaptive agency.

Affinities in adaptive agency offer here an alternative reading of historical relations of African and Syrian American women. Historical accounts usually focus on the tensions between black orientalism, embedded in African American respectability politics around 1900, and Syrian American proximity to white privilege. Black intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper explicitly racialized oriental women through orientalist harem stereotypes, [34] while Syrian American women, especially as citizens after 1915, had access to white privilege legally, but had to continually re-assert their worthiness of this white status culturally. As shown in the introduction, Syrian American communities actively sought to distance themselves from blackness to stabilize their claim to whiteness. I do not suggest that we should ignore these material traces of oppositional politics, but rather that we need to add a relational perspective on the interracial affinities in Syrian

[34] There is also a historical tradition of African American affinity with imaged 'Asianness,' which Bill Mullen subsumes under the label of "Afro-Orientalism" as "a counter discourse that at times shares with its dominant namesake certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory of thought on the practice and ideological weight of Orientalism in the Western world" (Xv). These histories revolve around male intellectual elite efforts to re-think African Americans' positions in relation to other oppressed peoples in colonial histories of domination. Mullen looks, for example, at DuBois' lifelong fascination with Asia or Malcolm X's redefinition of himself as a descendant of "of the 'Asiatic Black Man'" to explore how Orientalisms can "do the work of both colonizing and decolonizing the mind" (xiv). He posits that afro-orientalist imaginations were a kind of "strategic anti-essentialism" that allowed these thinkers to re-order the world, placing affiliations with the "Chinaman" as an "imaginary 'third way'" (xii) to break up the black/white binary. My project's scope does not include these trajectories, as such expressions of interracial solidarity focused on India and China, rather than the Arab world, and black orientalisms were central to the African American women leaders, engaged in respectability politics at the turn to the twentieth century, who place themselves into a binary opposition to oriental women.

and African American adaptations of the repertoire of respectability, which offers a different vantage point on these histories.

Figure 13. *Yours Sincerely, A.J. Cooper*, Frontispiece Image from the 1892 publication of *A Voice From The South*, public domain

Figure 14. Skaff Family. *Skaff 15 (1898)*, AANM Online Collection

Anna Julia Cooper's portrait, the frontispiece to her *A Voice From The South*, (fig. 13) depicts her as a renowned activist, intellectual leader, teacher, lecturer and respectable woman. Fig. 14 is the portrait of Wanda Skaff, who presents herself as a respectable mother in a Syrian immigrant family for semi-private audiences. These two images cannot be compared in terms of their contexts, political stakes or historical reach. However, there is an affinity between these two images in how both women's attire, posture and hair-do draw from the same repertoire of respectability. I see the relationality between their respective adaptive agencies in the affective impact of their embodied self-representation, which methodologically requires a specific kind of

historical analogy—a practice of interpretation/viewing of photography that David Eng defines as a non-mimetic, non-hierarchical relationship between referent and image (336). Rather than corresponding *to* official histories, such analogies draw on "similarity that is not sameness and as a difference that does not automatically translate into opposition—a 'corresponding *with*'" that "opens upon a terrain of historical representations in which these displaced connections depend upon the apprehension of a fissure, a break, a displacement, an absence" (340, emphasis added).

Eng's use of analogies stresses that objects and images—or in my case study, elements of repertoires and embodiment—can enter in a relationship outside of their sanctioned, narrative locations through the individual, affective historical associations of its viewers. Yet such individual associations are not arbitrary either. There is a material referent in the visual documentation of these women's embodied performances of respectability that places them in relation to norms of whiteness. However, it depends on the viewer whether or not such recognizably similar strategies of claiming ideals of American middle-class womanhood—ideals that excluded both African and Syrian American women—are read as a competition paradigm or as a non-mimetic historical analogy. Read as a traditional analogy, Cooper's and Skaff's claim to respectability could posit them as competitors who vie for entry into True (American) Womanhood at each other's expense—pitching citizenship against proximity to whiteness. A non-hierarchical analogy, however, could apprehend a fissure or break not between the racial differences of Cooper and Skaff, but between white supremacy and women's strategies of navigating exclusion. The Skaff family portrait is not a documentation of political activism in direct correspondence *to* Cooper's visual respectability politics, but I suggest that these historical traces of a non-hierarchical, non-mimetic correspondence *with* hegemonic repertoires of respectability in attire,

posture and hair styles can affectively re-orient values of normativity attached to hegemonic racial and gendered narratives.

Such a reading does not void the underlying ambivalence of respectability politics itself. Cooper's and Skaff's adaptive agency places them in a relation to True Womanhood, and to each other. Both portraits use scenarios and repertoires of respectability to reject sexualized, unclean, primitive and backward stereotypes directed at 'non-white' women; the self-conscious embodiment of respectability *as* non-white women poses an inherent challenge to racist ideologies. However, both embodied performances of respectability also confirm the validity of hegemonic, white, middle-class scenarios, reinforcing some of the prejudices that exclude them and other non-white women. Rather than offering a radically different conception of respectability politics as such, an analogous reading of Cooper's and Skaff's embodied self-representation represents a specific node for Syrian and African American histories that offers an alternative perspective. Photography as an archival medium registers the transmission of knowledge via embodied performances and thus photos offer a point of access to seeing/feeling interracial affinities that is not limited to the past. Traces of women's adaptive choices drawing from the repertoire of respectability may create or trigger individual associations in viewers today that result in alternative understandings of interracial affinities beyond black/Arab competition paradigms. This belated act of recognition may be prone to misinterpretation. However, Eng argues that this possibility of affective 'misinterpretations' is what actually enables unexpected correspondences and new forms of social formations through the feeling of photography (344).

The possibility to even forge such associations and to reconsider interracial affinities in Syrian American histories is a recent one. Photographs are among the few available documents that quite literally offer a glimpse into the existences of early Syrian immigrant women. The Skaff

family first settled in Iowa and the available, contextual material, placed alongside various family portraits, tells the history of the family's descendant who would go on to become a priest in the Antiochian church in Michigan (Skaff Family Documents). The official family archive thus documents Syrian American history and successful assimilation, but it also creates a history of absence for the life of Wanda Skaff. The photographs register her presence and the archive includes her name, but we learn little more about her life. And yet, the photographic documentation of her embodied self-representation, and the fact that her family donated this photograph to the museum in 2015, enable an alternative knowledge transfer beyond written archives. Its online publication turns this semi-private family portrait into a document in an intimate public sphere. Now this photograph, a documentation of Wanda's embodied adaptive agency in a particular historical moment, is available to a wide range of national and international viewerships. This opportunity of belated, public engagement may open new avenues for seeing alternative, historical analogies that can also contribute to reframing our understanding of the strategies and tools Syrian American used to negotiate their ambivalent location in between orientalist, racial and gendered frames.

Chapter 2 - Immigrant Mothers or New Women?

Race, Religion and Modernity in 1920s Syrian American Womanhood

The archive of *The Syrian World*, the major English language newspaper of the Syrian American community in the north east of the United States in the 1920s, documents traces of women's public self-representation in print media. As an institutionalized media outlet, *The Syrian World* shaped the community's ideals of Syrian American womanhood and enabled women contributors, as journalists or via reader comments, to publish their personal views as well. In this chapter I analyze how this newspaper negotiated the intersections of gender and Arab American racial ambivalence, and I show that its female contributors used adaptive agency to forge a vision of simultaneously 'respectable' and 'modern' Syrian American womanhood—a vision ripe with internal contestation. The 1920s were marked by intergenerational conflicts about the role of Syrian American women and the need to define Syrian Americanness for the next generation already born in the US.

While on the surface the debates revolved around marriage customs, traces of adaptive agency reveal more discursive layers at play in this very gendered racial self-fashioning of the early Syrian American community. These layers included, the association of oriental/Syrian womanhood with hyper-sexuality in the US at large, which triggered an active dissemination of respectability politics on the part of the Syrian American press. By the 1920s, Syrian Americans, as freshly minted citizens, were fully engaged in positioning themselves as a model ethnic community as well. The editor of *The Syrian World*, Salloum Mokarzel, embraced Cultural Pluralism, but this racial ideology had very different gendered ideals of traditional immigrant motherhood that ran counter to aspirations toward unmarked Syrian whiteness/Americanness.

Finally, women commentators and journalists themselves strategically adapted elements from the multiple, often conflicting, intersections of gender ideals, religion/race and modernity to articulate their own visions of proper 'Syrian' womanhood.

The case studies of this chapter reflect upon all of these three aspects. I analyze the reception of the Broadway play *Anna Ascends* (1920), in the national and Syrian American press, as well as the controversies on how to define proper Syrian American womanhood. These controversies played out in the reader comment sections of *The Syrian World*, at the same time the newspaper decided to print the musical's libretto in a series of eight installments between 1927 and 1928. *Anna Ascends* was written in 1920 by Henry Chapman Ford, a self-proclaimed Anglo 'admirer' of the great 'Syrian race' ("Why" 33).[35] He wrote his play at a peak moment of nativist agitation, so I read his deliberate crafting of a Syrian heroine as part of an anti-nativist, cultural pluralist/Americanizing agenda. Hoping to emulate the success of immigrant assimilation stories à la Mary Antin, *Anna Ascends* presents a tale of uplift and successful assimilation centered on the Syrian waitress Anna, who in all her trials remains a 'respectable' woman. What makes this play so relevant for Syrian American cultural self-representation is that fact that 'Anna' was explicitly embraced and endorsed by the Syrian American elites as a role model for the community.

The 1927/28 printing of the musical in *The Syrian World* for the benefit of its readership co-indices with a specific moment in Syrian American community formation. After the 1924 Johnson Reed Act, new Syrian immigration had come to a halt. At the same time, the existing Syrian American community members had already established themselves as citizens. *The Syrian World* framed explicit race-related concerns as a thing of the past, disavowing ongoing experiences

[35] All eight installments are entitled "Anna Ascends. Act XY" and published by Henry Chapman Ford in *The Syrian World* in 1927 and 1928. To ensure clarity in the in-text references to citations from the play, I cite the act numbers only to refer to the given installment.

of racism in the US. The newspaper's attention shifted instead to the perceived gender troubles with the next, American-born generation of Syrians. Here, the definition of modern, yet also respectable/traditional, Syrian American womanhood emerged as a central concern—a concern also reflected in *Anna Ascends*. This link was not stated explicitly, but in the very newspaper issues that printed the play editorial and reader comments on marriage politics, particularly with regard to marrying outside the community, as well as advice columns on proper domestic behavior for Syrian American women featured prominently. Unions of Syrian American women with Anglo Americans were frowned upon, and marriages to Muslim Syrians even more so (Gualtieri, *Between* 20).[36] The simultaneity of these debates and the printing and editorial endorsement of *Anna Ascends*, a musical centered thematically on a Syrian American woman marrying an Anglo American gentleman, thus generates a degree of cognitive dissonance. The spatial and temporal proximity between these two reference points establishes *a* relationship, but I argue that we need to look at the newspapers' and its women's contributors' use of adaptive agency to fully understand how the musical's ideals, the editorial vision and women's self-representation interacted in defining 'modern' Syrian American womanhood in this context.

This chapter works with the archive of *The Syrian World* stored in the Michael Suleiman Collection at the Arab American National Museum. Many scholars in the field have already addressed some aspects of the newspaper's politics; for example, Waïl Hassan and Jacob Berman

[36] In Syria it was customary to marry within the extended family to keep property undivided; in the Syrian American diaspora, this practice morphed into a tradition of marrying co-ethnics. If out-group marriage happened, it was usually between Syrian men and Anglo-American women. However, the second generation of Syrian Americans, growing up in the US, felt less bound to these traditions and by the 1920s mixed marriages became more common. *Anna Ascends* thus speaks to this trend among the second generation, but it also points to the ethnic complexities and potential divisions among Syrians. The majority of marriages outside the Syrian community were between Muslim Syrian men and American women, as single Muslim Syrian women emigrated to a lesser degree. The Maronite Syrians seized on this fact to stress the 'modernity' of Christian Syrian women in comparison to Muslim Syrians' backwardness, even though Maronite elites, publishing in *The Syrian World*, were equally anxious about 'their women' working outside the house or about marrying out (Gualtieri, *Between* 139-41).

have analyzed it for its affinity to Cultural Pluralism, while Sarah Gualtieri explored the relationship between *Anna Ascends* and the marriage debates in historical terms. My analysis builds on their foundations and adds, through the lens of adaptive agency, perspectives from Akram Khater's comprehensive study on the transnational formation of a Syrian-Lebanese middle-class. Khater focuses on how women in Lebanon selectively adapted elements of the multiple circulations and manifestations of modernity to re-negotiate ideals of family, class and nation. In addition to expanding upon these three important areas of research, applying the theory of adaptive agency contributes new insights into how modernity, race and Syrianness intersect in the US context, specifically through respectability politics.

Respectability and race are intimately linked in the entire cultural process of disseminating *Anna Ascends* and the subsequent discussions, in print, of ideals of respectable Syrian American womanhood. Recurring tropes, disavowals and contestations of different ideals concerning Syrian American respectability connect the musical, its national and local reception as well as the marriage debates—even if individually these different contexts appear unrelated. I argue that these multiple, at times contradictory, visions—for example, the editor's position compared to reader comments or to national perceptions of Syrian American womanhood—engaged with each other through shared reference points for adaptive agency. By following tropes and their adaptations by different 'stakeholders' in the public presentation of Syrian American womanhood, this chapter breaks new ground in the above-mentioned three areas. First, Cultural Pluralists had a very specific expectation of immigrant woman as keepers of tradition that would maintain spiritual and 'primitive' values in an ever more commercialized US public sphere (Irving 93-4). However, Syrian American women regarded themselves as modern and the intersections of cultural pluralist imaginations of immigrant womanhood with Syrian American self-fashioning have not yet been

explored. Second, a key factor in the national representation of Syrian American womanhood through *Anna Ascends* is that the wider public's interest rested primarily on the near-rape scene of the play. I thus argue we need a more careful analysis of how the community's self-fashioning addressed, or disavowed, the specters of hyper-sexualization of Syrian American women's bodies in this context as well. Third, I suggest reading these efforts—in the marriage debates and in the reception of the musical—as part of what Jane Rhodes calls "pedagogies of respectability politics" (201) that seek to distance Syrian American women from racialized stigmas of the sexualization of imagined black/oriental womanhood.

Rhodes argues that "the black press and black cinema" were "critical sites for instructing black women, especially those in the working class, on deportment, sexuality, and moral values" (201) at the beginning of the twentieth century. The endorsement of *Anna Ascends*, editorial commentary, advice columns and the selection which reader comments to publish all point to a similar, 'pedagogical' use of Syrian American popular culture and media to disseminate model behavior. In addition to the affinities in women's personal stakes fighting against sexualized oriental/black womanhood, we thus also see a strategic affinity in more institutionalized pedagogies of respectability politics via cultural institutions. At times these pedagogies of respectability may have inadvertently joined forces with black struggles for recognition and against exclusion from national subjecthood in the 1920s. However, affinities do not automatically imply solidarities. The recognizable elements adapted in the marriage debates as well as in both *Anna Ascends* and the endorsement of the musical show the Syrian American community's desire to 'ascend' into American, middle-class whiteness. I turn here again to traces of adaptive agency to analyze the underlying racial ambivalences that continued to shape perceptions and (self)representations of respectable Syrian American womanhood.

Beyond Cultural Pluralism: Modern Womanhood and the 'Syrian Race'

Salloum Mokarzel, the founder and editor of *The Syrian World*, was a member of one of the intellectually most influential families in the early Syrian-Lebanese American community. He was a Cultural Pluralist who fervently claimed that Arabness was compatible with Americanness; for example, by reframing the peddler as a sign of Syrian entrepreneurship and thus of emplacement in the US (Berman 189). Furthermore, Mokarzel thought to instill a sense of Syrian cultural distinctiveness in the next generation youth who could not speak Arabic anymore, and to showcase Syrian American cultural and intellectual sophistication to the wider American public (Mokarzel "Editorial Comment. Racial Consciousness" 38). To this end, he founded an English language newspaper, *The Syrian World*, in 1926, which was a significant departure within the Arab press of the time, but not from family business. His older brother Naoum Mokarzel had already founded the Arabic language newspaper *Al Hoda* in 1898, the preeminent newspaper for Syrian Americans.

Both newspapers were socially progressive. Naoum Mokarzel had strong political opinions: he used *Al Hoda* to express his fervent support for Lebanese Maronite causes (also in opposition to Orthodox Syrians) and he fought against the conservative influence of certain clergy (Suleiman, "The Mokarzels" 73). Salloum, on the other hand, positioned *The Syrian World* as an open forum for all ethnic minorities comprised under Syrianness. While his brother admonished the Americanization of Arabs, he embraced it. Or rather, he adapted the rhetoric of Cultural Pluralism to forge his vision of an essential cultural Syrian heritage that could and should be at home in the United States. Publishing in English, he aimed to convince both American and specifically young Syrian American audiences of the community's greatness (77-9). *The Syrian*

World archive thus offers a glimpse into the ongoing intra-Syrian negotiations of racial, ethnic and gender identities, and into the journalists' and contributors' efforts in self-representation toward the US public sphere. Once Syrian Americans had secured access to US citizenship, the meaning of Syrian American womanhood became the battleground for proving themselves worthy of national inclusion in the 1920s.

A significant part of Naoum Mokarzel's campaign against 'bad' clergy revolved around women's rights. He supported women's access to education and their public voice as journalists or writers. He dryly noted the irony that women as peddlers travelled on their own over the entire nation, while women who published their opinions were deemed immoral. Naoum also supported Afifa Karam's career and presented her as a model for women of her 'race.' Despite his dedication to women's education, Naoum did not fully support women's right to vote or equality at large (76). Salloum Mokarzel himself did not comment on gender issues in his official role as an editor of *The Syrian World*, but he wrote a series on "The Marriage Problems among Syrians" under the pseudonym 'A. Hakim', where he held an imaginary interview with the 'sage on Washington street' to explore Muslim-Christian marriages as a "Syrian American phenomenon" (Gualtieri, *Between* 145). But independent from his personal views he supported a perceived middle ground position: Mokarzel opened the pages of *The Syrian World* to a wide debate that included conflicting views and women's own voices (Suleiman, "The Mokarzels" 81). The final section of this chapter will return to the implications of these inner-Syrian tensions between race, religion and respectability, but first I will analyze the position of *The Syrian World* and of *Anna Ascends* as trans/national nodes that mediated the gendered perception of Syrian American racial difference between the US public and the community.

Officially, Syrian American commentary in *The Syrian World* appears surprisingly unconcerned with racial stigma or even with questions of immigration restrictions.[37] Expressed concerns about Syrian American women revolve around the perceived dangers of the larger cultural changes in the US during and after World War I. In national debates the shift in ideals from domestic Victorian gender roles, like True Womanhood, to self-sufficient, working and sexually liberated ideals of the New Woman predate the war, but the Syrian American community appears to grapple with these changes in the 1920s. Further, while racism is rarely mentioned, race features prominently in *The Syrian World*, albeit in a cultural pluralist form of celebration. Mokarzel himself does not comment or refer to the specific, cultural pluralist views of proper immigrant womanhood. He is focused on fighting Nativism, but the delineation between Cultural Pluralism and Assimilationalism (and their respective visions of desired immigrant motherhood) in the newspaper's 'ethnic' vision for the community was much less clear.

Within the intellectual elite, Assimilationism and Cultural Pluralism were competing as the two dominant schools of racial ideology: Assimiliationists, also known as Americanizers or as advocates of the "melting pot" theory, supported the Syrians' right to citizenship while demanding their cultural assimilation. Cultural Pluralism supported the notion of an inalienable racial/cultural identity as a beneficial contribution to the American nation. Not all Syrian Americans agreed with

[37] If cases of explicit racial discrimination are mentioned, it is rather the exception than the rule. For example, in one of the first issues, in November 1926, the editor Salloum Mokarzel takes up the community's concerns over racial discrimination against Syrians in the Americas at large, as Syrians had just been expelled from Panama and Haiti – allegedly due to "professional jealousy" and for being mistaken as 'non-white' coming "from a part of Asia" (Mokarzel "Editor's Comment" 39). Mokarzel then uses this example to briefly refer back to the time when Syrians had to fight for their status as white Americans in the US as well, but in his view this is already history long past – even though the racial prerequisite court cases ended merely a decade ago. Also the Johnson Reed Act, which had been passed just 2 years prior and cut off any further Syrian immigration from the homeland, is barely mentioned, even though these racialized immigration restrictions directly affected the development of the Syrian American community. On rare occasions Mokarzel refers to what he sees as deplorable misunderstandings that still circulate about the Syrian race. For example, in the February 1928 issue, he complains about a Senator from Pennsylvania who labeled Syrians as 'trash' ("Future of The Race" 37).

Mokarzel's Cultural Pluralism, but many shared his anxieties about the potential loss of Syrian ethnic identity in a melting pot scenario. The coming of age of the first Syrian American generations born in the US coincided here with the national crisis during World War I over the supposed failure of melting pot models to ensure undivided loyalties to the nation —for example, the national anxiety about potentially conflicting loyalties among German Americans. However, in response to this disapproval that some ethnic communities had not completely assimilated into an 'American' identity, thinkers like Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne offered an altogether alternative understanding of this phenomenon. Kallen's essay on "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot" (1915) was a foundational text for Cultural Pluralism, claiming that the domestication of immigrant difference was central to true democracy (Irving 95). Bourne developed this vision for a pluralist America further in his essay "Trans-National America" (1916), positing that the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups was an integral contribution to the formation of an American nation.[38]

Both essays approach Cultural Pluralism as a hallmark of American exceptionalism, even while espousing a Eurocentric perspective; however, this did not deter Syrian Americans from identifying with either ideology. On the contrary, as argued in the racial prerequisite court cases, Syrian Americans considered themselves to be part of the white immigrant classes that could contribute to the American nation just as effectively as Italian or Irish immigrants. Moreover, from a Syrian American perspective that sought inclusion into US society as white citizens and without sacrificing ethnic pride in their own Arab cultural background, Cultural Pluralism offered a

[38] Cultural pluralists, just like Nativists, relied on biological essentialism to explain racial difference. However, they positively valued such differences and regarded them not as a threat but rather as cultural expressions that could enrich the nation. Kallen envisioned a cultural federalism united by institutions, while Bourne argued for a hybrid cosmopolitanism that combines the best traits of immigrants; but in both cases they framed cultural differences as an essentialist category (Irving 93).

decisive advantage. This was because it embraced ethnic nationalisms as part of Americanness: "Instead of a melting pot, then, America was to be a concert of racially distinct groups, with the peculiar 'genius' of each race contributing to the larger project of American civilization; the question of whiteness could be left aside" (Guterl 321). Matthew Guterl refers here to the ambivalent relation of the Irish American nationalists to whiteness, but Syrian American intellectuals like Mokarzel also used this very logic to eschew the question of whiteness (supposedly settled anyway) and to negotiate the nature of 'Syrianness' in the US context.

In doing so, Mokarzel regularly conflates race and culture in his quest to prove an inalienable Syrian racial-cultural essence that could not be lost (Hassan 18). Mokarzel posits the necessity of "self-assertion on part of the different racial elements" and that it is time to decide not if, but how Syrians can or will be a "component element in the making of the American nation" ("Editorial Comment. Future" 37). His language adapts the rhetoric of the Cultural Pluralists by emphasizing that the preservation of a Syrian ethnic identity is actually an American duty and virtue. In contrast to other elite members in the community—such as George Ferris, who feared that the US melting pot would inevitable assimilate Syrians into the American mainstream, erasing their ethnic identity (35)—Mokarzel simply did not consider the Arabic language as the primary marker of such an ethnic identity. The foundation of *The Syrian World* was controversial in this respect, and in light of the newspaper's success he claims vindication for his decision to separate language as a cultural element from race consciousness and pride in heritage: "The intelligent element of the younger generation, those to whom the language [Arabic] has the least appeal, appear to be the strongest factor in bringing about this revival of race consciousness" ("Racial Consciousness" 38).

Mokarzel is convinced that Syrian Americans can only gain wider public attention if they perform in a way that fulfills "the expectation (…) for something characteristic of their own race" ("Racial Representation" 47). He thus advocates for a kind of ethnic auto-Orientalism in self-representation to gain visibility as a distinct racial group, which in turn would allow ethnic lobbying as 'racial considerations' permeated life in the US. [39] This kind of Syrian American Cultural Pluralism is usually interpreted in light of Syrian American ascent on the ladder of whiteness (Hassan 20), or in terms of how the Mahjar intellectuals actively managed the meaning of Arabness (Berman 179). However, Cultural Pluralism as a racial ideology came also with a very specific imagination about ideal immigrant womanhood, which Katharina Irving subsumes under the label "immigrant motherhood."

All of the three major racial ideologies of the early 1900s—Nativism, Assimilationism and Cultural Pluralism—used notions of immigrant womanhood to frame their concerns. Nativists constructed immigrant women's supposed hyperfertility as race-suicide, blending eugenics with biological racism that claimed women transmitted inferior gene pools. Assimilationists and Cultural Pluralists positioned immigrant women as the vessels that would produce a 'new' American culture. Americanizers, who wanted immigrants to shed their cultural traits as soon as possible, imagined immigrant mothers as the key to successful assimilation. As 'sentimental' women they were expected to be more open to assimilation than men and they would influence their children as mothers. Social and housing programs thus directly targeted and surveyed immigrant mothers' behavior (2-9).

[39] Mokarzel points here to the case of a NY magistrate who used 'racial consideration' as his justification for giving the job to another German American. Rather than fighting the injustice of these considerations as such, Mokarzel claims Syrians should do the same. He fully embraces the pluralist logic that it is an American characteristic to have a racial consciousness, which dissolves the contradiction of claiming a Syrian ethnic identity as an American citizen.

Cultural Pluralists, on the other hand, thought to maintain the specific cultural traits of immigrants for the benefit of a new, hybrid American society. They saw immigrant mothers as bearers of tradition and of an ethnic culture that should not be lost. Also here the emphasis was on the transfer of such cultural legacies to their children. Presiding over households, safely lodged away from the wider public in the private sphere, they would maintain cultural differences as "conservative, tradition-bound, family-oriented, and fecund" (93) women—in other words, a racialized version of the Victorian True Womanhood ideals. Cultural pluralism, however, framed immigrant women as mothers not primarily for the sake of domestic bliss, but to reclaim them as vessels of eternal, primitive motherhood—positioned as an antidote to the effects of modernization and as a means to maintain spiritual legacies in the face of American materialism. Immigrant women were thus pushed into the roles of the guardians of the home/national values at a time when more and more white, middle class American women claimed a role in the public sphere (99-100).

The overall process of feminization in the cultural framing of immigration placed women's roles and public appearances center stage. This increased women's possibilities for adaptive agency, but compared to the widespread nativist views on immigration, the more 'positive' melting pot or cultural pluralist frames held much less sway. Culturally, the hegemonic eugenic subtexts of the nation's anxiety about, or fascination with, immigrant woman placed Syrian American women, as oriental immigrants, in proximity to sexualized stereotypes about black womanhood. The stereotype of jezebels—lascivious black women as the opposite of sexually pure white women—was retooled in the first decade of the twentieth century to signify the threat of miscegenation, corrupting white men. This specific threat then also resonates with the eugenicist fears of nativists about immigrant women's corruption of the imagined Anglo Saxon gene pool. This is not to say that negative stereotypes about black and immigrant women were the same.

African American women were rather framed as aggressive, while immigrant women were imagined as passive, and thus also more compatible with domestic expectations of motherhood. However, specifically as supposedly hyper-fertile mothers also this passive sexuality was seen as a threat through interracial mixing (17).

The implied binary between assimilated immigrant womanhood as modern versus cultural pluralist ideals of traditional womanhood, with its respective racial associations, emerges as a central fault line in the Syrian American debates about what constitutes respectable womanhood. Such discursive, ideological modern/tradition binaries never correspond to lived experiences. Most Syrian Americans would have considered women as bearers of their culture, but also as modern––and certainly not primitive. Cultural Pluralism alone thus cannot explain the different facets of the reception of *Anna Ascends* and of the arguments raised in the marriage debates, set in-between the ambivalent relations of 'modernity' to Syrian Americanness and racial Otherness. Gualtieri briefly mentions that as peddlers Syrian women were seen as "aberrations from the normal family economy" (144), just like African American working women. US society judged Syrian American families harshly for failing to perform as a 'traditional' family, while at the same time immigrants (just as colonized countries overseas) were expected to adopt 'modern' family relations to prove their worthiness for American middle-class status: "anyone who wished to be middle class, had to, at least, make a nod toward allowing women 'modern' possibilities such as education and a role in upholding of the morality of society" (Khater 182).

The Syrian World's endorsement of the musical *Anna Ascends* was an editorial act of adaptive agency to claim such modern immigrant womanhood. What is striking here is that Anna, as a fictional characterization of a self-made woman, largely does not reflect the ideals of womanhood Syrian American most commentators endorsed alongside the printing of the play. For

example, Syrian American women's non-traditional place in the workforce is barely mentioned in the commentary, but the importance of motherhood, domesticity and education of the next generation all feature prominently. This commentary leans toward a cultural pluralist framework. One of the most regular contributors in this area was the Presbyterian priest Reverend W.A. Mansur, who came from a missionary school in Syria to the McCormick Seminary in Chicago and established himself as a prominent figure in the Syrian intellectual elite circles (Mokarzel "Editor's Comment" 41). He repeatedly reached out to younger Syrians through articles in *The Syrian World*, and in December 1927 he wrote about the "Problems of Syrian Youth in America" (Mansur 8). Mansur attributed the current crisis in Syrian American womanhood and marriage not so much to the immigration restrictions and increasing Americanization of the youth, but rather to larger cultural shifts brought about by the Great War as the "dividing line between the old and the new in Syrian-American thinking" (8). Further, he frames this generational shift as an American, not just Syrian, 'problem': women achieving suffrage; the increased economic independence of youths; a turn away from domesticity; and, in his eyes, a lack of appropriate forms of education to face the challenges of an industrial civilization.

By declaring Syrian intergenerational struggles as identical with American cultural shifts at large, Mansur reaffirms Syrians' position as US citizens rather than as an immigrant community. At the same time, he suggests that Syrian women may keep the good old American gender roles alive in their ethnic virtue—in cultural pluralist fashion. In Mansur's eyes, these 'modern' changes are going too far when it comes to female independence, particularly when they threaten traditional community formation through intermarriage. He does not outright condemn the practice, but he cautions to "marry within your class of ideas and customs" (12). This caution blends concern for Syrian ethnic purity, comparable to white Americans' anxieties about miscegenation, with direct

‘advice’ and guidelines for young women on how to behave properly — the above-mentioned Syrian American version of pedagogies of respectability.

The subsequent issue of *The Syrian World*, in January 1928, features another commentary on “Matrimonial Problems of Our Young Generation,” but this time by Paul Deab. Deab is more confrontational than Mansur, complaining about the children's indifference towards marriage, and he is outright dissatisfied with the increasing number of intermarriages with other nationalities (21). Deab’s analysis of the causes of this trend blame women’s increasing independence in the US at large. He perceives liberal values as a threat and locates this cultural shift in the economic independence of the postwar generation (both men and women). He takes special aim at Amelia Earhart, who had come to represent American modernity as the quintessential New Woman: “Formerly a young woman of eighteen had to do but marry. Now, she thinks of flying across the Atlantic” (22). Earhart was just about to fly across the Atlantic as the first woman in this very year, 1928, which appears to have offered a symbolic reference point for Syrian Americans to articulate their position in changing gender ideals. The hegemonic ideal of the New Woman itself had been already a few decades in the making, but it seems that its larger cultural resonances offered a backdrop for Syrian American negotiations of the threatening/desired change in gender roles with the coming of age of the second generation of Syrian Americans in the 1920s.

Syrian American anxieties about the changes in gender roles after World War I, the above mentioned “dividing line between the old and the new in Syrian-American thinking,” also indirectly referenced the changes due to women’s suffrage, only granted by 1920 in the US. The question of women’s suffrage, the so-called ‘woman’s question,’ spurned significant controversies in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century British and American contexts. Victorian attitudes toward gender roles had established the notions of separate spheres, the public domain

for men and the private, domestic role for women, on both sides of the Atlantic. The suffragette movement and the political and social upheaval of World War I forged the vision of the New Woman as a new type and symbol of modern womanhood that superseded the Victorian antics of True Womanhood. The New Woman rejected the domestic sphere and motherhood, maintained herself and sought sexual freedom:

> 'The New Woman' with her short haircut and practical dress, her demand for access to higher education, the vote and the right to earn a decent living, her challenge to accepted views of femininity and female sexuality, this ambiguous figure was the focus of much media debate and of intense anxiety as well as hope in the decades spanning the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century. She was—and still is—the subject both of history and fantasy (Heilmann and Beetham 1).

In many ways, the New Woman was more of as literary construction than a material reality. Sarah Grand coined the term in an 1894 *North American Review* article that examined the increasing popularity of novels that centered on 'modern' women. She noted a trend among novelists to explore women's roles in the public sphere, and such questions about subjectivity and representation linked feminist movements to the spirit of modernism at large.

As a hegemonic trope with significant pop-cultural currency, the New Woman then also invited adaptive agency. For white, middle-class women the specter of the New Woman offered an important discursive middle ground between the binary of the fallen woman and the angel of the house. However, while artists and novelists usually portrayed New Women sympathetically, Nativists and other conservative politicians feared race suicide and an end of white, middle-class

hegemony due to the supposedly corrosive behavior of independent New Woman (see Utell; Childs 82). For immigrant and/or racialized women such adaptations were even more complicated. The New Woman may have been radical in its call for women's independence and sexual freedom, but, just like True Womanhood, it was also a continuation of white women's privilege—especially in Anglo-centric contexts.

Sarah Grand herself was a well-heeled wife of a British colonial officer and her feminist efforts aimed at protecting British wives from sexually transmitted diseases, contracted by soldiers involved in overseas affairs (Jusova 13). Her imperial feminism cared little about Indian women's rights, and the trope of the New Woman, in its domestic and transnational manifestations all over the world, could easily carry such an imperial mind-set as well. The New Woman projected American cultural hegemony as a symbol of modernity, but it was also an inherently transnational phenomenon that offered context-specific avenues for women's public agency, usually in conjunction with emerging, nationalist sentiments. The Japanese New Woman, for example, stressed the value of marriage and virginity, as opposed to the American New Woman, but publicly asserted the right to female sexual pleasure. Like all feminist movements, the manifestations of the New Woman were highly heterogeneous and complicit with various power hierarchies in their given contexts, but the demand for women's control over their own sexuality was a recognizable element that linked most of cross-cultural adaptations of New Womanhood (Heilmann and Beetham 2-10).

In the US context, the New Woman would come to "define a specifically white identity" (Bergman 227): a gendered vision of national modernity that cast immigrant women as traditional/backwards and African American women as primitive/uncivilized. Syrian American women, as US citizens, were in-between the racializing black/white and immigrant poles that

framed the American New Woman. What is more, as members of the Syrian diaspora community, with strong ties to the old country, women's modernity was also negotiated between US and Syrian-Lebanese nationalist terms. Khater defines this experience of a multi-layered modernity as a central characteristic in the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora (155). Women in Mount Lebanon as well as in the US "were mixing and matching 'modernity' and 'tradition' to suit their particular desires, needs and circumstances" (180). Khater's research shows that the communities' transnational perspectives helped to challenge the strict binary in US perceptions of modernity imposed on immigrant (and colonial) families. In the following, I explore in more detail how the contradictory racial logics of New and Immigrant Womanhoods shaped the domestic adaptations and perceptions of Syrian American womanhood—both logics appear in *Anna Ascends* and frame the protagonist.

"A hint of Mary Antin"? The Reception of *Anna Ascends* (1920) in the National Press and in *The Syrian World* (1927-8)

Anna Ascends tells the tale of the Syrian American waitress Anna, who improves herself against all odds, including being the victim of an attempted rape. The play ran successfully on Broadway in 1920 and was then turned into a silent movie in 1921/2 by Paramount.[40] The movie version of *Anna Ascends* is largely lost, save a few photographs and 6 minutes of film, but its libretto survived in the archive of *The Syrian World.* The newspaper advertises their publication of the play, printed in eight installments between July 1927 and February 1928, to their readers as: "Follow this virtuous, determined and intelligent Syrian girl in her defense of her honor and her struggle for success" ("?? What Happened to Anna?" 64). This endorsement emphasizes the

[40] The same studio that released *The Sheik* at the time (Gualtieri, *Between* 141).

protagonist's respectability, but the analysis of the play's national reception in the US media below shows that American audiences were most interested in the rape scene. This discrepancy in perceptions of "Anna," in many ways a Syrian American New Woman, reveals the limits of adaptability of the New Woman trope for 'not quite white' Syrian American women.

As a character, Anna combines elements of the cultural pluralist celebration of Syrianness with her ascent/assimilation into modern American womanhood. This may explain the musical's appeal to the above-mentioned Syrian American *male* intellectual elite's vision of modern, yet traditional Syrian American womanhood. However, the newspaper's pedagogies of respectability cannot entirely escape the racializing subtexts of Anna's sexual vulnerability as a newly arrived immigrant woman in a major American city. This ambivalent reception depends on the Broadway play's own adaptive relationship to racial tropes of immigrant womanhood. In her successful class ascent, Anna represents Syrian Americanness as reminiscent of Mary Antin, widely-recognized as a model immigrant woman. At the same time, *Anna Ascends* also draws on the trope of the sexually vulnerable im/migrant woman in the city—a trope shared with the newly arriving black women from the US South. While this element features prominently in the national reception of the play and the movie in the early 1920s, *The Syrian World*'s endorsement in 1927 appears entirely oblivious to any potentially damning associations with the play. Indirectly, though, I argue that the emphasis on Anna's respectability reveals the commentator's awareness of the possible racial stigma underlying Anna's 'unscathed' ascent.

The dissemination of respectability politics via mass media became increasingly common in the 1920s. Black elites used their press and cinema as pedagogical tools to acculturate African American women newly arrived in Northern cities to the local cultural and social practices. For example, the emerging genre of race movies, black cinematic responses to white supremacism in

mainstream movies after *The Birth of a Nation* aired in 1915, offered "a similar socializing function for urban black communities as mainstream silent cinema did for European immigrants" (Rhodes 202), sending messages about group solidarity, class aspirations and struggles against racism. Moreover, this "was a highly gendered project; women were presented as African Americans' moral standard-bearers and thus ultimately responsible for racial progress" (203). Albeit on a much smaller scale, the Syrian American framing of womanhood follows similar patterns: the active dissemination of *Anna Ascends* in the Syrian American press was coupled with discussions on Syrian American women as transmitters of Syrian culture. Further, *Anna Ascends* shares the messages of class aspiration and group solidarity and adds—most crucially for the role of adaptive agency within Syrian American respectability politics—an exploration of how the shifting ideals of modern/immigrant womanhood intersected with Syrian American racial ambivalence. This specific intersection between modernity/tradition and non-white womanhood links *Anna Ascends* to Oscar Micheaux's 1920 race movie *Within Our Gates*, which shifted the reference frame for black women's respectability from the Victorian morals of True Womanhood to the ideals of the New Woman (Rhodes 207-9). These parallels in the adaptation/endorsement of the changing ideals of womanhood between the two movies reveal again affinities in how black and Syrian American communities' respectability politics resisted the exclusionary frames of 'modern' womanhood as a white/Western prerogative. As black and 'not quite white' women they could not abandon traditional respectability as readily as white, middle-class women either.

A key difference here is that *Anna Ascends* was an Anglo American production not aimed primarily at the Syrian American community, but rather American audiences at large. The play's author, Henry Chapman Ford, sought to establish himself by adapting already circulating genres of immigrant success stories with a 'new' ethnic group. Ford stated that his main intention was to

enter the "virgin field" of "Syrian drama" ("Why" 33), trying to capitalize on the popularity of immigration narratives of assimilation. In his introduction on "Why I wrote a Syrian play," published in the July 1927 issue, Chapman himself narrates the origin story of the play. He claims to have met the real-life Anna Ayyoub in a Syrian coffee house in lower Manhattan and that they became 'fast friends' while he taught her English.

The musical then offers a similar story line about an uptown gentleman who explores downtown to study foreign born communities. This so-called 'Gents' then meets the virtuous waitress Anna in a lowly Syrian coffee house, where she performs excellent work while defending herself against underworld crooks who want to lure her into prostitution. Anna is represented as eager to better herself by absorbing English words as fast as she can, all while being exceedingly patriotic—the embodiment of the 'true American spirit.' At the end of the first act, everyone leaves the stage and the crook Bunch returns to the coffee house to rape Anna and then sell her into prostitution. Anna bravely fights back and stabs him with a kitchen knife. She then disappears into hiding as she thinks she killed Bunch. In the second act, we encounter Anna three years after this incident. She calls herself Ms. Adams, works as a personal secretary Uptown, has become fluent in English and continues to fight off any unwanted male attention by biting the men's hands if they try to touch her. Further, as a model of the self-reliant 'modern woman,' she has written a bestseller called *'Anna Ascends'* and is now hired as a secretary by her publisher, who also happens to be the father of Gents. In the remainder of the play, Anna and Gents fall in love, and though Anna at first refuses to marry him because she thinks herself a murderess, ultimately, she discovers Bunch is alive and she can live with Gents happily ever after.

In his extensive review of representations of 'Arabs' in the US film industry, Jack Shaheen lauds *Anna Ascends* as one of the very few positive pop-cultural representations of Arabness in

the US in the entire twentieth century—which, moreover, also features a brave, female heroine (73). In contrast, Gualtieri's analysis of *Anna Ascends* cautions against Shaheen's optimism. She argues that, despite the praise for all things Syrian in the play, Anna's ascent depends on leaving her Syrianness behind. Anna may only claim her whiteness—that is, her Americanness—once she becomes a successful, upper-class woman who has come through all her trials unscathed. At first glance it is easy to see why the Syrian American community would have embraced this play and actively endorsed its representation of Syrian American womanhood as a model to follow. The protagonist's ascent into the norm of white, middle class Americanness represented both the appropriate work ethic and successful assimilation in Anna's embodiment of the 'true American spirit' (Gualtieri, *Between* 144).

Anna ends up marrying an Anglo American suitor, which would have been a concern for Syrian American commentators in the marriage debates in 1927 and 1928. The upper-class status of Gents, her love interest, seemed to outweigh his Anglo Americanness, while Anna's class ascent changes the affective value of Syrian ethnic difference enough to be compatible with Americanness. It is noteworthy here that the play itself and the commentary on marriage outside the Syrian community in *The Syrian World* share a similar language. Just as Rev. Mansur, as quoted above, advises Syrian immigrants to marry within the same class, so does Chapman in his play. Gents explains to Anna that he could only love and marry someone who would "belong to the same social strata—the same class… Anna: Yas—I see—Anna must ascend" ("Act One" 39). Her ascent in class facilitates proximity to whiteness that then also allows her to marry Gents in the end. However, the inherent contradictions of Anna's 'Syrian whiteness' in a US racial context are not resolved within the play, and even less so in its media reception.

I argue here, then, that it is not class but hegemonic tropes of womanhood that evoke Syrian American racial ambivalence. Gualtieri reads the marriage debates and the community's endorsement of the musical as part of an increasing Syrian American retreat into private and domestic spheres, specifically after the end of further Syrian immigration from the homeland in 1924 and with the community's development from being sojourners toward becoming settled members of society (*Between* 20). Within these processes of community formation, though, the emphasis on Anna's respectability and success helped to gloss over the ongoing threat of being racialized via immigrant womanhood. Charlotte Karem Albrecht argues that *Anna Ascends* was so popular among Syrian Americans—despite its assimilationist push—because its story line reflects the wider narrative that Syrian "ascent in class" may be "employed as retroactive proof of their pre-existing whiteness" (104). Through the lens of adaptive agency, it becomes apparent that *Anna Ascends* also enters into an adaptive relationship with various imagined womanhoods that make up Anna as a character: immigrant motherhood, New Womanhood and the specter of fallen angels. I thus suggest reading the community's selective emphasis on class, respectability and whiteness as an indirect disavowal of the racial associations embedded in these tropes.

Chapman adapts multiple trans/national sources to frame Anna as a character. The musical partially adapts elements from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) to develop Anna's story. Shaw, in turn, draws on Greek mythology. His play presents the story of an upper-class male character who turns a working-class girl into a proper English lady by teaching her standard English. In *Anna Ascends*, Gents also creates/enlightens Anna by encouraging her to master the English language; however, in the US context race and Anna's independence expand this story line far beyond class and social ascent. As an immigrant woman, Anna improves herself through education. She publishes a bestseller about her experiences as a newly arrived immigrant woman,

and only enters into a relationship with Gents once she established herself as his equal. In the US context, Chapman's Anna thus blends *Pygmalion* with elements from Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*—the best-selling story about the ascent of a Russian Jewish immigrant woman to model citizen. For his purposes, it was thus important that Anna was an 'ethnic' character and the play's relationship to the templates of *The Promised Land* was not lost on its wider audiences. For example, *The San Francisco Chronicle* (1921) compares the character "Anna" —writing about her own life—as having a "hint of Mary Antin in there" ("'Anna Ascends' Opens" 5). Antin's literary self-fashioning from an oppressed Russian Jewish subject into a patriotic, educated, English-speaking American citizen features similar claims toward representing modern womanhood and an ascent into Anglophone whiteness (Yudkoff 4-6). Reading Anna as a Syrian American version of Mary Antin sheds further light on how the trope of the 'successfully' assimilated immigrant woman could speak to both racial ideals of melting pot Assimilationism and Cultural Pluralism, which, as previously shown, remained in unresolved tension within the Syrian American community.

Bourne's essay "Trans-national America" (1916), a foundational text for Cultural Pluralism, opens with a direct invocation of Mary Antin: **"**Mary Antin is right when she looks upon our foreign-born as the people who missed the Mayflower and came over on the first boat they could find. But she forgets that when they did come it was not upon other Mayflower but upon a 'Fleur,' a 'Fleur de Mai,' a 'Fleur di Maggio,' a 'Majblomst'"(58). Antin's *The Promised Land* distanced itself too far from her ethnic Russian Jewish roots for Bourne's cultural pluralist taste. He admonishes her to recognize the (European) ethnic heterogeneity of immigrants. However, Antin also embodies the model immigrant to the US, whose presence enriches the nation like no other. Antin herself, as a self-made, successful immigrant woman, challenges the

traditionalist gendered views of Cultural Pluralism on primitivism or immigrant motherhood. *The Promised Land* offers a platform for both of these two visions of immigrant womanhood, as Antin's mother keeps traditions alive and stays at home: "the first generation clings to the traditions of the Old World, while the second generation leads the life of the New" (248). *Anna Ascends* as a play reflects these negotiations between 'old and new' thinking that dominated the intergenerational disputes about marriage in the Syrian American community as well. Anna as a character is a first-generation immigrant, but in the play she moves from ethnic/ignorant immigrant womanhood to modern, assimilated womanhood within only three years. Her character then represents a condensed version of the ongoing re-negotiations of gender roles and racial ideologies that can support a selective adaptation of her 'Syrian whiteness'—but the play itself does not really posit Anna's ascent into unmarked whiteness.

On stage, Chapman uses stereotypical props to represent Syrian ethnic identity: for example, we meet Anna in the coffee house with a chain of garlic around her neck, mainly for humorous effects. Anna loses these obvious ethnic markers once she assimilates, but not her implied Arab American racial ambivalence. Anna never disavows her Syrian roots, but she sets out to 'improve' them.[41] As an individual character *she* may ascend, but Chapman still retains racial hierarchies in his play that would not allow entry to 'unimproved' Syrians. Despite Chapman's openness to immigration and his relative progressive view of Americanness as a

[41] Despite some cultural pluralist premises, Chapman's vision of Anna's ascent into middle, class and modern American womanhood appears closer to the logics of the melting pot. In his introduction on why he wrote a Syrian play he states: "Their family life, their clean way of living impressed me and I decided that the Americanization of such a race was a big factor in making 'the melting pot' one of the greatest nations in history" ("Why" 33). However, Chapman's 'cultural appreciation' of Syrians remains highly racialized. Many Syrians, like Mokarzel himself, envisioned their ethnic heritage to be related to the commercially successful Phoenicians rather than Arabs, and Chapman echoes this sentiment when he refers to their Phoenician heritage, represented by "northern blue eyes" (33), as superior in history, placed alongside Egypt as another imagined origin of (Euro-American) civilization. Such racialized historical frames invoked the 'natural' compatibility of Syrians with the American nation, supported a cultural pluralist agenda and the idea of Syrian whiteness 'despite' their Asian origins.

cultural rather than a biological identity, [42] Anna never loses her 'non-quite whiteness' based on the idea that race can be seen. The play consistently links Syrians to other 'not quite white' Mediterraneans, like Italians or people from the Balkans. The crooks Bunch and Beauty taunt the Syrian coffee shop owner Said with racial slurs about being a "greasy" Italian, while he defends himself as a "'Merican," claiming Syrianness as compatible with Americanness in opposition to racialized Italianness ("Act One" 39). Even after Anna has successfully Americanized, her new employers place her into ethno-racial categories based on her looks as she "[m]ay either be an Oriental or from the Balkans, can't tell" ("Act Two" 35).

The play emphasizes that character is more important than 'breed,' as long as Anna conforms to the codes of becoming "the true type of American womanhood" ("Act One.II" 40). This new kind of true American womanhood is based on patriotism and education, blending Cultural Pluralism with discourses of modern womanhood via assimilation; however, for immigrant women like Anna the sexual liberty of white, middle-class New Women remains off-limits. Access to this new kind of simultaneously true *and* modern American womanhood for Anna is strictly tied to respectability and sexual purity. *Anna Ascends* shares quite a few themes with *The Promised Land*, but with one significant deviation: the addition of the very detailed and explicit near rape scene at the end of the first act. I argue that this addition is central to the implicit racialization of Anna. The mere fact that Anna as a Syrian immigrant has to master 'civilization' in itself keeps an orientalist backdrop alive, but, on top of that, the threat of forced prostitution and sexual vulnerability places her role in relation to tropes of fallen angels and tragic mulattas.

[42] Gents represents a superior, idealized 'real American', not an "Ellis Island American" ("Act One.II" 38) as Anna calls it. This is the "class" Anna needs to ascend to and due to her enthusiastic patriotism, her "true American spirit" (39), she can do so. The play repeatedly pitches Anna's potential for patriotism against Gents' vain sister Nell, who is a 'real' American, but lacks the true spirit.

Anna's successful ascent into (immigrant) whiteness depends crucially on her respectability, that is, remaining "unscathed," and the specter of rape also follows her when she has become a successful writer and proper lady. As a reference to the play with the play, Chapman writes that Anna published *'Anna Ascends'*—an "economical-fictional work"—about an emigrant girl who "fights her way unscathed to the top" ("Act Two" 37). Fisk —the benevolent publisher, Gents' father and Anna's new boss—recognizes that Anna herself is the girl from the bestseller, and while they discuss the merits of this play to raise awareness for the need of protection for new immigrant girls he intently inquires if Anna "really remained 'clean… unscathed?'" (45). In the end Anna's claim on whiteness, both as a Syrian and an American woman, hinges directly on maintaining her honor. As a pedagogical tool for Syrian American respectability politics, the imperative to "defend" one's honor is clear; the focus on honor and final marriage further nod toward the traditionalists' view of womanhood, while Anna's independence and self-defense claim modern womanhood for the community. Remarkably, the rape scene is not even mentioned or commented on in *The Syrian World*, despite its prominent place in the play. The newspaper does not just exercise selective adaptive agency here, but specifically adaptive agency via disavowal of possible associations of Anna, as a representative young Syrian immigrant woman, with prostitution.

In the beginning of the play, the two crooks Bunch and Beauty come to the coffee shop to inspect Anna's potential as a prostitute. Bunch states: "I want you to see this Moll. She is worth twenty a night to us" ("Act One" 40). When Anna finally arrives on the stage she enters with two gallons of olive oil, garlic around her neck, a dictionary in her pocket plus an American flag in her blouse. The crooks muse: "Beauty—Great. Slap up that hair of hers. Doll her up with some glad rags and you have a winner. But she looks hard to handle. Bunch —Naw, they're *all* easy, if you

know how. I'll have her 'on the walk' in a week" (41). Even though 'all' could refer here to women in general, in the US context it rather draws Anna into a class of all 'non-white' women who can be broken, used and abused 'easily'—or rather, without legal repercussions. Bunch's insinuation that he will rape Anna to break her echoes with the histories of sexual abuse of black women during US slavery, and quite directly relates to the precarious situation of immigrant *and* migrant black women as new arrivals in Northern cities at the time. Some of these women resorted to prostitution simply to survive, and a major concern of African American respectability politics was with black women's sexual purity, a perceived antidote to the trauma of sexual exploitation during slavery. These concerns were further amplified in reviews of race movies and general discussions about black women's respectability in the black press. Black elite women, such as Nanny Burroughs and Mary Church Terrell, published about the benefits of the tenants of True Womanhood in periodicals like DuBois's *The Crisis* and the *National Baptist Union* newspaper (Rhodes 204). *The Syrian World*'s emphasis on Anna as an "unscathed" model Syrian American woman follows similar rhetoric and strategies.

Hegemonic imaginations about the sexual availability of non-white women's bodies intersected with the moral taint of prostitution, both in stereotypes about black women and, as shown in chapter one, oriental women as harem slaves. African and Syrian American respectability politics, as a form of adaptive agency via disavowal, aimed to ward off such associations with moral stigma and racial prejudice. [43] In *Anna Ascends* the fact that Anna could have been raped is

[43] Rhodes analyses how the rise of the movie industry changed the scale and possible impact of black pedagogies of respectability. It is impossible to tell if readers heeded such advice via the black press, but it is fair to say that the increasing popularity of black cinema, especially of race movies that directly sought to oppose racist stereotypes, offered an entirely new scale of dissemination and visual immersion in embodied representations of respectability politics on screen (209). Since *Anna Ascends* was turned into a Paramount movie in 1921, it also had a potentially national impact.

further explicitly linked to her position in the "Syrian underworld" of New York. Reflecting on Henry James's position as an uptown gentleman, fascinated by, but separated from the promiscuous world downtown, Dennis Pahl dissects the racial and classed tensions in multi-ethnic Manhattan of the 1900s. Downtown, the new America ruled by money, not only evokes the proximity of Wall Street to poor, immigrant labor, but also a racialized, amoral space for women's prostitution (142-5). Chapman's set-up in *Anna Ascends*, where the uptown gentleman 'explores' amoral downtown, thus directly frames Anna in these racializing and sexualizing spatial terms. National reviews of the play, like that in the *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1922 (C.3), also note that the Syrian quarter in Lower New York is repeatedly cast as an 'underworld'[44] full of sexual threat.

The play itself then acts out these threats (and fantasies). As long as Gents is present at the coffee house—the superior, Anglo hero who may protect Anna—the crooks have to wait. However, once she is alone closing up the shop, Bunch returns. First, he tries to bribe Anna into prostitution by offering a stolen shawl as a gift, but Anna is fearless and refuses him outright and threatens to call the police. Then Bunch turns violent and yells: "Not in time to save you, you damn little wench. (…) I mean that when I am through with you, you're going to be damn anxious to sit at the table and have a drink with that guy with the $20.00. *Now* do you get me?" ("Act One" 47). Bunch then begins to grab and drag Anna around on stage. The scene is quite protracted, as Bunch first hides Anna from the police and when he finally tries to drag her out of the store, he hisses

[44] Associations with immigrant poverty and potential criminality were not restricted to Arabs, but the metaphorical "street Arab" (Berman 181) was a common reference at the time to denote any marginal, wandering, 'un-civilized' foreigner who hoped to ascend into a Protestant American middle-class while dwelling in their street experience. This figure was introduced in 1871 by Horatio Alger's *Tattered Tom; or, The Story of a Street Arab*, which defined Arabness as a mutable and transitional identity one goes through in the hope of an ascent in class; it remained a key figure in Jacob Riis' depictions of New York immigrants in *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890. The term 'street Arab' could be applied to Syrians, but was not ethnically exclusive, and the Syrian American intellectual elites' Cultural Pluralism worked hard to reframe 'Arabness' from a transitional state in the US process of assimilation to being a cultural essence for Syrians (181-6).

"Now I start your education baby" (48). But Anna gets hold of a kitchen knife and stabs him, upon which she "*shows no remorse for saving her honor*. (…) *You* drag me down. Anna ascends" (49).

Bunch, the rapist, is cast as a not-quite white Irish American (Gualtieri, *Between* 144). While he thus does not represent the stereotypical tropes of the black rapist or the lusty Chinamen, his character still resonates with the hegemonic framing of racialized men as a sexual threat to white women —and yet, his conviction that he *can* prostitute Anna is linked to her status as an oriental immigrant woman. It is thus possible that the Syrian American endorsement of Anna read the rape scene as a confirmation of her whiteness; however, in the play itself, and also in its national reception, the discursive links between rape, respectability and race turn toward a decidedly non-white framing of Anna. The whole scene offers a bizarre mix of *racialized* sexual violence, as Bunch does not seek to rape her because she is a 'white woman,' but because she is a vulnerable immigrant woman destined for prostitution. Anna's brutal, remorseless self-assertion, which ultimately saves her honor and makes her fit to 'ascend' to Americanness, is racially ambivalent as well—closer to stereotypes of 'aggressive' African American women than 'meek' immigrant mothers. As a modern woman she saves herself, but the specters of murder/crime and rape maintain a constant need to prove her respectability throughout the play. Ultimately, the audience's responses show that channeling representations of Syrian American womanhood through this rape scene invites racializing associations with orientalist imagined Arab womanhood as sexualized spectacle.

The reviews of *Anna Ascends* were either very positive or very negative, but they all in one way or another allude to the play's "dramatic" element. [45] This centrality of the rape scene for the

[45] A brief overview of various positive or negative headlines about the play reflects the two main tendencies among the play's and the movie's reception across the nation: Critics either loved or hated the play, but in either case all agreed that Alice Brady was a great actress. For example, The *Boston Daily Globe* stressed that "Alice Brady Acts "Anna Ascends": New Romantic Melodrama of Strong Popular Appeal" (1919);

play's reception cannot be separated from the ambiguous whiteness of Anna as a Syrian American character. The most significant factor here is that Anna was played by a very popular Anglo-American actress, Alice Brady, both on Broadway and in the subsequent movie version. The ensuing anxiety about the sexual threat against her appears in a frequent slippage between Anna as a character and Brady as an actress.

Figure 15. *Anna Ascends*, Clippings on theatrical productions, Houghton Library Harvard Theatre Collection

Figure 16. *Anna Ascends*, White Studio photograph, Billy Rose Theatre Division of The New York Public Library

the *San Francisco Chronicle* headline declared that "Anna Ascends" Scores Triumph At Fulton Theater (1921), and lauds *Anna Ascends* as a masterpiece. Meanwhile the *St. Louis Post – Dispatch* finds that "Anna Ascends' and Descends Quickly: New Play with Alice Brady, Almost Ludicrous After First Act" (1920) and the *New York Tribune* dryly states that "Anna Ascends," But Reaches No Very High Level: Good Theme Told in The Terms of the Trite and Obvious in the New Melodrama Now at the Playhouse" (Broun).

The newspaper clipping does not contain information on the exact source, but the preserved article dates to September 23rd, 1920 and offers a review of *Anna Ascends* after its opening night on Broadway. Both the accompanying photograph and the title of the review, "Alice Brady Braves City Perils In New Play, 'Anna Ascends,'" focus on Alice Brady herself rather than the play as such (see fig. 15). The racial ambiguity/tension in the slippage between Anna as a Syrian American character and Alice Brady as Anglo American actress appear as the focal point of the play's reception. In the newspaper and in the promotional White studio photograph (fig. 16) Anna's non-whiteness is visually communicated through costume (the folkloric, Mediterranean dress), setting (the immigrant store) and props (the garlic, the jewelry and the transparent veil). It is further significant that the studio photograph depicts Brady/Anna in the moment when she wards off Bunch's rape attempt by stabbing him to promote the play. The implication that Brady herself, in her embodied presence as a 'white' actress on stage, faced a sexual threat was not lost on the reviewers. For *The San Francisco Chronicle* (1922) the congeniality of Brady in Anna's role depends on her ability to "let herself go": "Miss Brady is at her best when she can 'let herself go,' and as the unquenchable Anna she casts aside all restraint to excellent effect" ("California Stars Alice Brady" 10). The *St. Louis Post*, on the other hand, explicitly warns that such a play threatens to tarnish Brady's reputation, whose talent is "badly needed" ("'Anna Ascend' and Descends Quickly" 20) on the speaking stage. The *Post* reviewer deems the first act acceptable, but takes issue with its "extravagant, almost preposterous climax" (20) and attacks Chapman as an author for writing a play that "barely escapes becoming ludicrous at its most serious moments" (20). These thinly veiled references to the rape threat perform a telling slippage between Anna as character and Brady as actress. While it may be 'thinkable' to threaten to rape a Syrian immigrant

woman, Brady is clearly read as representative of white womanhood in these comments and it appears outrageous to insinuate her rape, even as a fictional event on stage.

Not all newspapers performed such a slippage, but also in other reviews race remains a central lens through which to frame Anna's experience. *The San Francisco Chronicle* (1921) considers Anna's life story as a "sufficiently possible theme for a play" ("'Anna Ascends' Opens" 5) and celebrates it as an uplift story. In another review *The San Francisco Chronicle* (1921) describes how the play ran in front of a packed house at the Fulton theater, testifying to its popularity, but also here there are racializing references to "the taint of the underworld" that is "still upon the girl" ("'Anna Ascends' Scores Triumph" 16) even after she ascends. I believe it is important to examine this wider reception since Anna as a character negotiated and represented Syrian American racial identity to a much larger audience, filtered through the whiteness of the actress Alice Brady.

Chapman, Brady and the wider audiences fully embrace the sexualized titillation of Anna's near-rape to promote the play—and the opposition between Brady and Anna rather confirms Syrian American 'non-whiteness' than dissolving it. The superimposition of Anna and Brady extends to Chapman's own framing of the play when he introduces it in *The Syrian World*.[46] He redirects his attention from Anna to Brady at the end of his introduction to the play:

> As we have Anna happily married, we will leave her. The beautiful and talented star I saw in the awful movie [probably *Little Italy*] was Miss Alice Brady. I sent

[46] He claims in *The Syrian World* that is was more or less a coincidence that he chose a female protagonist. He claims to have based his decision on the fact that "women stars in the theatrical world pay an author much better royalties than male stars" ("Why" 34), which is a curios contradiction to his page long origin story about the real-life Anna Ayyob he supposedly met himself. I would speculate that he knew very well that a melodramatic storyline needs female actresses (and audiences) and that the sexual associations with oriental womanhood were popular as well.

> the script to her father, Mr. William A. Brady, and inside of a week the play had been read, accepted, contracted for and in rehearsal, and—the rest is history ("Act One" 34).

Chapman presents William A. Brady, a Broadway producer, and himself as equally generous, benevolent patriarchs who decide the shape and form of the Syrian play and of Alice's involvement. However, Alice Brady's own version contradicts this story. In a 1919 interview in *The Boston Globe* she claims that she brought the play to her father and even staged a trial rehearsal to convince him, because she wanted the part so badly ("Alice Brady Acts 'Anna Ascends'" 5). On one hand, this indicates her own agency in choosing the part, but on the other the need to stage a trial rehearsal points to how delicate the subject must have been, if she had to test its suitability in private first. To back-up Brady's decision to accept the role, she announces in the review that her father was lost for words seeing his daughter's "splendid" performance in "such an exacting role" (5). "Exacting" can be read as a veiled reference to the threat of sexual violence on stage, but just like most of the reviews the father's praise focuses on Brady's acting skills, not the play and its risqué plot. This strategic move ensures Brady is not too closely associated with the role. The father further stresses that Brady herself took on and practiced the play, lest he could be suspected of pushing his daughter into a disreputable part. What, then, could have accounted for Brady's interest in this "well constructed and constantly interesting" (5) play?

For once, Brady specialized in playing Mediterranean characters. The previous year she starred in the 1921 movie *Little Italy*, directed by George Terwilliger,[47] and *The New York Tribune's* (1922) glowing review of *Anna Ascends* claimed that "No one can give more vim and

[47] Presumably the movie Chapman saw when he discovered Brady and considered awful.

dash and "cheek" to these Syrian and Italian girls than Miss Brady" (Underhill 10). *The San Francisco Chronicle* also directly links the two movies in its 1922 article: "Not since the vivacious Italian girl of "Little Italy" has Alice Brady had such a thoroughly congenial role as that of Anna Ayyob" ("California Stars Alice Brady" 10). Through her former role, Brady brings Anna's Syrianness closer to the ambiguous whiteness of Italian American women. Italian themes and stereotypes have always been a popular staple in American film. Silent films about Italian Americans usually adapted a limited set of themes (love, romance, violence, family) and stereotypes (gangsters, machos, madonnas). *Little Italy* was centered on a marriage plot and the ensuing family crisis—the daughter refused to accept the suitor her father picked for her. The movie peddled in racializing Italian stereotypes, focusing on her two brothers (the criminal and the good brother) and rivaling Italian clans, but it appears that rape was not part of the plot lines (Russo 225-6). If that is so, the association of sexual titillation/prostitution with Syrian American womanhood would distinguish Syrian Arabness from Italianness already at the time, and foreshadow the future split in racial status of former European 'not-quite-whites' and explicitly racialized Syrian and Arab American communities after 1967.

Despite Chapman's positioning of Syrian Americans alongside Irish or Italian Americans in the play, the latter could eventually fully 'ascend' into whiteness, while Syrians would increasingly 'descend' towards an orientalized Arab 'non-whiteness' over the course of the 20th century (Naber). I believe that Brady's interest in *Anna Ascends* stems from the implied sexual appeal of oriental womanhood. These hegemonic tropes of imagined Arab womanhood offered her adaptive agency to deliver a more sexually explicit performance on stage than she could as a purely white character, or even as an "Italian American."[48] This is another indication of how the

48 Rudolph Valentino, the most prominent Italian American actor of the 1920s, is a case in point. He represented the archetypical Italian: exotic, an outlaw and passionate (Russo 227). As *The Sheik* his

orientalist dimensions of sexualized imaginations about Arab womanhood were never entirely gone, even during the peak period of Syrian assimilation into Americanness.

The New York Tribune's review of the play in 1920 spells out this orientalist racializing and takes the deliberate blurring of the identification between Brady and Anna the furthest into 'reality.' [49] It describes how the actress prepared for her role with "an intensive study of the Syrian character" and "made numerous excursions to Washington Street and the East side in search of character material" ("In 'Anna Ascends' Alice Brady Finds" B2). In the play Anna repeatedly bites the hand of (mostly Anglo, definitely non-Syrian) men who make advances on her, and the article transfers this ploy to the description of Brady's own experiences in Little Syria, where she "became a rather well-known figure in the coffee houses and restaurants of one sort and another in the Balkan belt. There were flirtatious glances from the Levante and other points East, but she did not require to set tooth in any hand" (B2). This review brings the orientalist-racializing subtext of *Anna Ascends* full circle by projecting it back onto actual Syrian American communities. Brady also claims again in the *Tribune* feature that this was her all-time favorite part, and she clearly deploys the rape scene as a sexualized spectacle in the play for self-promotion. This promotion works equally well when reviews separate the racial ambivalence of Anna from Brady as actress, or when they fully embraced her 'not quite whiteness' as this makes Brady's performance 'interesting'. The appeal of oriental, sexualized Otherness thus remains an integral part of *Anna Ascends*'s wider reception. Even if the plot lines proclaim her social and racial uplift, the play's/movie's

'Italianness' explains part of his audience appeal and reassuring proximity to European whiteness, but the specter of rape, and colonial rape-and-rescue tropes, contribute to his performance of a 'recognizably' oriental character for US audiences.

[49] And Brady claims that she learned the "Syrian tongue" enough to sing the song "Moon Flower' in "native Syriac", written by Alexander Maloof for the play.

representation of Syrian American womanhood to national audiences revolved around Anna's 'non-whiteness.'

I have quoted the national reception at length to show that the racial ambiguity of Anna as a character was widely legible and even desirable to promote the play. The Syrian American endorsement of Anna as a model Syrian American woman thus likely deliberately overlooked the racializing specters of the rape scene. The existence of the attempted rape in the play, however, could have hardly been entirely ignored in *The Syrian World*'s decision to endorse the play. Read as an act of respectability politics, the decision to publish a play with a near-rape of a Syrian American protagonist in 1927 and 1928 may have offered a perfect cautionary tale that the Syrian American press would not have printed otherwise. Sensational stories about crime, abuse and prostitution were central to black respectability politics disseminated via press and mass media (Rhodes 209), but the Syrian American press usually does not feature 'fallen' Syrian women. On the contrary, even the slightest deviation from the perceived proper standards of Syrian American womanhood quickly caused controversy, as the final section of this chapter will show. Syrian American women contributors to *The Syrian World* did not explicitly respond to *Anna Ascends* or its prescription as a role model for Syrian American womanhood by the male elite. However, they directly addressed and negotiated the tension between racialized/oriental Otherness and modern/white middle-class womanhood that the character of Anna embodies.

The Muslimwoman and the Marriage Debates—Women's Voices in *The Syrian World*

In *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai identifies the new scale, reach and speed in the interactions between migrant populations and globalized

mass media as a hallmark of modernity, especially from the 1980s onwards. While he focuses in particular on the political implications of how *electronic* media changed the ways diasporic communities use imagination to shape their own practices, ideals and norms beyond confines of nation-states, his theory of modernity at large, a theory of rupture and mobility, can also be fruitfully applied to earlier contexts. Moments of modernity are "irregularly self-conscious, and unevenly experienced" (3). Such moments then may materialize differently in certain times and places, but they usually revolve around a perceived break between old and new ways of thinking, which in turn is often extrapolated to ethno-national and racial perspectives on traditional/modern societies. The Syrian American case exemplifies such uneven, even contradictory perceptions of what modernity means in a given time and place. As an immigrant community from a 'traditional' society they are stereotyped as backwards in US national contexts, while Syrian Americans understood themselves as modern and yet struggled with changing gender roles as signs of 'new' thinking.

The differences between these uneven, multiple experiences and perspectives are often negotiated via imagination as a social practice, that is, the ways perceptions of modernity and embodied practices and sensations inform each other: "the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai 31). Appadurai then goes on to explore the ethnographic and anthropological implications of imaginative practices in different globalized intersections of what he calls ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (33). While he is mapping out the globalized relationalities between electronic media and migration in these different layers or 'landscapes,' his view of agency through migrant media consumption offers

important insights for my approach to adaptive agency and earlier, non-electronic circulations of cultural productions as well. Media consumption creates "resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project" (4). Arab and Syrian American immigrants, in an early twentieth century US context, were surrounded by a popular culture and political discourse saturated with specific racial and gendered tropes, orientalist and otherwise. Adaptive agency enables here a very specific kind of self-imagining to negotiate access to cultural citizenship (and whiteness) as part of their uneven experience of modernity as recent US immigrants. As the previous case studies have already shown, Arab immigrants, and in particular the early Syrian diaspora in the US, consumed and adapted orientalist media and national racial tropes in their self-fashioning, including orientalist narratives like the *Arabian Nights* or visual scenarios of respectable American womanhood in early cinema and photography.

Within these negotiations of modernity and race we need to again pay specific attention to the role of gender. Multilayered processes of modernity could carry diverse and contradictory gendered meanings, but, as Rita Felski points out, intimate relationships and the question of what constitutes modern womanhood in families were central to the conceptualizations of modern subjectivity in the early 1900s (3). Such questions re-surfaced in the Syrian American marriage debates of the late 1920s. Syrian American women were expected to represent modernity and respectability, while facing racial ambivalence as a not-quite-white immigrant community at the same time. Race, gender *and* religion shaped which cultural tropes Syrian Americans adapted, or rather disavowed, to claim such modernity. In *The Syrian World*'s reader comments sections, female readers explicitly invoked the imaginations of Muslim women as oppressed and backward to position themselves as modern: an oppositional adaptive agency that sought to stabilize their

proximity to US American whiteness through their Christian heritage, albeit in uneven and internally contested ways.

The image of the veiled Muslim woman is one of the oldest orientalist tropes deployed to signify 'European/Western' modernities at large; as an orientalist stereotype, the Muslimwoman has a deep genealogy of discursive circulation in a range of non-electronic media, such as colonial-era photography, literature or paintings. Variations of this image have an enormous cultural staying power and continue to dominate current debates and anxieties about Islamic Otherness as well. Amira Jarmakani dissects what she calls "mythologies of the veil" (*Imagining* 2) in the US cultural sphere from the 1890s onwards, but I turn here to Miriam Cooke's term "the Muslimwoman" to point to a specific, recurrent adaptive element within these mythologies. Cooke creates the neologism the Muslimwoman to emphasize that today the concern with Muslim women is "so extreme (…) that veiled, and even unveiled, women are no longer thought of as individuals: collectively they have become the Muslimwoman. I combine 'Muslim' and 'woman' into one word, *Muslimwoman*, when these two words are used to evoke a singular identity" ("Rejoinder" 91). I apply Cooke's term, despite is contemporary origin, to my archival material, because the Syrian American Christian women commentators in *The Syrian World* (and Rosemary Hakim in chapter four) adapt precisely this conception of a singular identity, captured by Cooke's term the Muslimwoman, in their self-fashioning.

Cooke's contemporary re-consideration of the Muslimwoman seeks to draw out the multi-layered, even contradictory uses of the singular image of veiled women, as it can both limit and empower Muslim women. On the one hand, Islamists apply the uniformity of the Muslimwoman to control women and neo-Orientalists invoke the oppressed Muslimwoman to justify islamophobic policies. On the other hand, more and more Muslim women adapt and use the

transnational currency of the trope to either challenge the very label, or to develop a cosmopolitan consciousness based on shared religious affiliations—the latter is also tied to how electronic media enables diasporic community formation beyond localized contexts ("The Muslimwoman"140-2). The current mobility and multiplicity in different uses of the Muslimwoman as a hegemonic trope thus exemplify how context-specific adaptations of the same trope can have a range of political impacts, and yet offer an analytical node that captures how Muslim women experience and use imaginations of modernity differently—presently, but, as I argue, also historically. Muslim feminist re-appropriations of this trope are not visible in my case studies, but my archive documents that Christian Syrian American women adapted both orientalist and imperial feminist invocations of the 'backward' Muslimwoman to present themselves as respectable, modern US citizens. However, their racial positionality remained ambivalent in doing so.

Muslim (and Arab) women do not need to wear a veil to be perceived as a Muslimwoman. Cooke argues for the post 9/11 context that the "veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape" ("The Muslimwoman" 141). However, as shown in chapters one and two, early Christian Syrian American women did not need to be 'veiled' to be associated with harem fantasies and Islamic/racial difference either. And through its inextricable association with veils, Syrian American references to the orientalist genealogies of the Muslimwoman could inadvertently evoke the larger, circulating mythologies of sexualized harem slaves and oppressed Muslim women that continued to shape public perceptions of Syrianness. Despite its unpredictable impact, I read the fact that there were recurring Syrian American adaptations of this very trope as an indication for a certain level of awareness that notions of Arab cultural inferiority were tied to negative associations with Islam *and* oriental-racial

difference for Christian Syrian immigrants in the US.[50] In this light, such adaptations/disavowals of the Muslimwoman were part and parcel of Syrian American respectability politics that negotiated the racial ambivalence underlying representations of modern Syrian womanhood.

The Syrian World recurrently presented idealized womanhood as the cultural foundation of the Syrian race and proof of cultural compatibility with modern Americanness, even before the publication of the installments of *Anna Ascends* accompanied a large-scale debate about Syrian American womanhood. Syrian American women contributed poetry, short stories and an occasional travel report to *The Syrian World*; they also wrote advice columns, directly engaging in respectability politics via media outreach. But the commentary in the reader forum and the short pieces that present brief life sketches of 'model Syrian women' offer the most direct insight into how women presented themselves. Model biographies tended to adapt imperial feminist frames that validated modern womanhood as a Western subject position, while women's reader comments on the marriage debates worked with orientalist views of the Muslimwoman. I now briefly contextualize these intersections of imperial feminisms and modern womanhood with the early Syrian diaspora community formation, and then return to the model biographies and comments in *The Syrian World*.

The model woman biography was a common genre in the emerging, transnational Syrian-Lebanese middle class. Both returning emigrant women and the women who never left selectively chose which elements of modernity they incorporated into their daily lives. From the 1890s onwards, Syrian-Lebanese women actively engaged in debates about women's rights in the emerging magazine culture that catered to female readers. This was never a homogenous front;

[50] The women's perspectives may have also been aware of the cultural proximity of Islam to blackness in the US and the legal context which barred Syrian Muslims from US citizenship until 1944 as well, but I cannot deduce that with certainty.

some model biographies celebrated 'modern' Syrian-Lebanese women in the domestic sphere—women as the angels of the house—while others celebrated prominent women's successes in public life. Such biographies in the Middle Eastern press expanded visions for what kind of performances of womanhood were acceptable, especially if women were active in nationalist movements. However, in all cases Syrian-Lebanese women had to "fulfill purity and self-lessness" (Khater 151) to be able to access publication venues (146-56).

In the US context, in addition to the diametrically opposed demands of representing domesticity and modernity, Syrian-Lebanese model women were also racialized according to an imperialist feminist agenda. Hanna Kasbani Kourani exemplifies both the shift from a traditional, domestic woman to a Syrian-Lebanese New Woman and the subsequent racializing of her activism in the US. Educated in American and English missionary schools in the Syrian province, Kourani became a teacher in Tripoli, but remained fiercely conservative in her early years. Despite being employed herself, she advocated for the woman's 'natural' place in the home. However, her views profoundly changed during her trip to the United States. She travelled to the International Women's Meeting held at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 to represent Syrian women. Her speeches were so successful that her representative role was even entered as an example in the *Midway Types Catalogue* and she herself began writing speeches that called for the dissemination of modern womanhood among Syrian-Lebanese women. She divorced her husband and toured the US for three years on her own as a successful lecturer. Upon her return, she published a fiery speech on "Modernization and Its Influences in the East," which extolled the accomplishments of Western women and called upon Eastern women to assert their own abilities and equality with men (Khater 155-6).

Kourani's advocacy for women's rights engaged in feminist discussions in both the US and what is today Lebanon, but her case also displays the complexities and complicities in transnational feminist activism. For example, the *Midway Types Catalogue* publishes a brief model biography that explicitly places her activism in an imperial feminist context:

Figure 17. *Representing the Orient*, in *Midway Types*

> Representing the Orient.- The women of the far [sic] East are struggling to obtain an individuality, and an influence in the public sphere proportionate to that enjoyed by their sex in England and America. A notable example of this effort was given at the Exhibition in the person of Mrs. Hanna Kourany, a lady from Bayreuth [sic], whose mission was the showing of the condition of the women in her country. In

> accomplishing this purpose she has delivered many lectures outlining the past and present status of those women and suggesting such methods of reform as were likely to be beneficial. These efforts have been warmly responded to by American ladies, and Mrs. Kourany has carried her work as far as California. At the Exhibition this Bayreuth missionary was to be found a great deal of the time in the Women's Building; but she was also a frequent and welcome visitor to the Turkish village on the Midway. Her lectures were elegant and instructive, and wherever she went she acquired enthusiastic friends, disposed to help her in her efforts to elevate the condition of her sex in the Orient (fig.17).

Contrary to the description's claim that Anglo women enjoyed "influence" in the public sphere, the suffragette movements in Britain and the US were still engaged in seemingly hopeless battles for women's right to vote. However, by using Kourani as a native informant, her own critique of Syrian-Lebanese women's issues could confirm the perception that Western women enjoyed superior rights. Moreover, her speeches do not seem to have led to any sustained, sincere concern with Syrian women's rights among "American ladies." Furthermore, the catalogue explicitly casts Kourani as a 'middle woman' between the Midway Plaisance and the Woman's Building at the World Fair, indicating that her activism and standing as a 'modern' Syrian-Lebanese woman could not escape the racialized, US-specific orientalist reference frame at the Chicago fair.

Akram Khater offers a much more nuanced picture of Kourani's activism set within the transnational formation of a Lebanese middle class. Returning emigrants like Kourani entered the ranks of feminist writers in the Middle Eastern press who were agents in the region's gradual cultural changes. Orientalist and imperial feminist perceptions ignore the local roots of modernity:

in Mount Lebanon, for example, women had worked outside of the house, in silk factories and agriculture, since the 1830s. Syrian-Lebanese women were already used to pushing the boundaries of private/public spheres in their everyday lives as well, through engaging in charity work and social networks (147-58). Western perceptions of the modern nuclear families and constructed ideals of separate spheres grated against these Lebanese realities on the ground.

As discussed in chapter one with regard to Syrian American family portraits, diaspora families' unorthodox working practices, with Syrian women frequently working in the public sphere, directly intersected with their racializing as 'unassimilable' immigrants. The modernity of the family was central to the modernity of the nation, but for immigrant communities, and especially for 'oriental' ones like Syrian Americans, imperial frameworks mapped strict binaries between modern/traditional, secular/religious and rational/emotional onto the West/East. Adaptive agency helped to negotiate these multiple, intersecting binaries. Direct resistance to this crude mapping of the world was rare. For example, while male Mahjar intellectuals often did not consider women their equals, claims for women's rights in the name of modernity were common—and these claims then resonated with European Orientalisms (Khater 181-2). However, through the simultaneity of so many potentially contradictory binaries, model biographies and women's publicly voiced opinions could upset some of the hierarchies through multiple adaptations that destabilized discriminating associations.

The model biographies of 'modern' Syrian American women in *The Syrian World* represent such destabilizing potential. The November 1926 issue offers a brief sketch of a Syrian model woman who even seems to exceed the fictional success story of 'Anna Ayyoub.' Sumayeh Attiyeh is presented as "A girl of the East who is bringing light and delight in no mean degree to the West" (41). *The Syrian World* promotes her writing and lecture series about life in Syria, while

presenting her as “a model of personal success in the face of adversity and handicaps” (41). In a typical rags-to-riches immigration/assimilation narrative, the newspaper recounts how Ms. Attiyeh arrived in Chicago with barely any money, but worked her way to the top—first she was a clerk in Marshall Field’s, but soon she became a full-time lecturer travelling the Anglophone world all the way to New Zealand and even meeting with Theodore Roosevelt. The editors must have been pleased with the way she represented Syria, as they praise her “extraordinary talent” and claim that her lectures evoked “respect and admiration” for her native land. Attiyeh’s representation of modern Syrian American womanhood appears as the opposite to Kourani’s imperial feminism. She undermines orientalist expectations by showcasing the virtues *and* modernities of ‘Eastern’ womanhood to Americans. However, when it comes to the representation of Syrian Muslim women’s modernity in *The Syrian World* the agenda shifts again.

The September 1928 issue features another short portrayal of a successful Syrian woman; however, this time it is a personal account by a Muslim Syrian medical graduate student. Sanniyeh Habboob entitles her segment as “From the Harem in Syria to the Medical College in America. By Miss Sanniyeh Habboob” (31). It focuses on how coming to America liberated her: "From the Harem to the hospital! From a dependent life to an independence! From the seclusion of a Mohammedan home to a medical degree!” (31). She claims to be the first Muslim woman to study medicine in the US, and professes to be grateful not only for the professional enlightenment, but also for learning more about the blessings of Christianity and the opportunity to go back to her home country and help the “women and children who are shut up behind walls” (32). Despite the apparent tailoring of the message to a Syrian Christian and/or American orientalist audience, the subtext of her liberation clearly claims this as a personal success and she rejects matrimony and motherhood in the process. Haboob thus adapts elements of the independent New Woman, but,

just like many suffragettes at the time, she also frames her 'liberation' in utilitarian terms. As a female doctor she is better able to serve others, in accordance with stereotypes of female care giving. Yet her promise to return and 'save' other Muslim women trapped behind harem walls adapts a colonial position of Western savior/superiority and the singular image of the oppressed Muslimwoman as well. Haboob's multiple use of internally contradictory adaptive agency draws on the trope of Muslim women's oppression to highlight Syrian Christian modernity, but her message of feminist self-reliance undercuts 'Christian' family values and gender roles as well. Her model biography, the only one a Syrian Muslim woman published in *The Syrian World*, thus challenges traditional Syrian gender roles, while reproducing the Muslimwoman as anti-modern, racial Other at the same time.

In principle, *The Syrian World* was a central platform that aimed to unite the different religious factions within the Syrian communities: Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Druze, and Sunni Muslim (Hassan 19).[51] The content of the newspaper celebrated all things related to Arab culture and Syrian heritage. The formation of a Syrian American ethnic identity through the collective immigrant experience—that is, the negotiation of overlapping worlds—supported Mokarzel's cultural pluralist vision. This discursive unity, however, fractured when it came to defining modern Syrian American womanhood. Intra-Syrian ethno-nationalism flared up with specters of (rare) Muslim/Christian weddings, invoked as a threat to the community (Gualtieri, *Between* 145-6). It

[51] An exception to this rule appears in Mokarzel's own editorial commentary in May 1927 when he refers to a specific provocation by a fellow Syrian Christian, Mr. Howell, who secretly runs tours for tourists into Syrian Quarters in New York. Such ethno-tourism appears to have been a variation of auto-orientalist self-marketing, presenting the 'authenticity' of New York's 'diverse' neighborhoods. However, overseas politics interrupted the presentation of intra-ethnic harmony among Syrians. In 1926 Syrians revolted against French colonial rule and Christian elites were suspected to have collaborated with the French (Bawardi 4). In his lectures on these tours Howell blames his fellow Syrian Christians as traitors for collaborating with the French and he even goes so far as to state that this collaboration justified the massacres and violence at the hand of resisting Muslim Syrians (Mokarzel "Notes" 40). Mokarzel sternly rejects these accusations and calls upon his community to not let themselves be exploited and misrepresented.

is thus perhaps not surprising that Christian Syrian Americans framed different *religious* affiliations as a *racial* difference, combining the ethno-national racial views of the US with orientalist perceptions of Arabness. Just as the marriage debates erupted, Mokarzel not only printed *Anna Ascends*, but also commented on extreme international anxiety about two incidents in the Syrian diaspora elsewhere in the Americas. In 1928 Christian Syrians had to defend themselves against association with the alleged abduction of Brazilian and Argentine women into Syrian harems. They did so by branding these tales as a Muslim, not a Syrian, problem (Gualtieri, *Between* 145-6).

This strategic shift in ethnic affiliation also dominated the ensuing discussion in *The Syrian World*, which called for marriages of compatibility, rather than convenience, as a sign of Christian Syrian modernity in the US, and as a point of distinction toward Syrian Muslims. The controversy around Mary Soloman's bold call for full equality and freedom for young Syrian women revealed the limits of this approach. First generation Syrian American feminists like Afifa Karam had already advocated for marriage reforms: Karam called out the double standard of calling for women's 'modernity' in public while controlling them in private (Gualtieri, *Between* 148). The trope of the 'modern woman,' popular in colonial discourses as well as in Islamic modernism, was also used by the Syrian American diaspora. However, by the 1920s the expectations of second-generation Syrian women like Soloman put such lip service to the test. Gualtieri frames Soloman's desires as an ambition to assimilate and fit into American life (*Between* 149), but the multiple, intersecting manifestations of her adaptive agency in these discussions reflect the centrality of race and religion in the formation of respectable and modern Syrian American womanhood as well.

In her letter to the "Reader Forum" in January 1929, Soloman boldly proposes a feminist vision of equality between boys and girls. Soloman opens her comment with the following title:

"A SYRIAN GIRL VOICES AN OPINION. Complains Girls Are Not Given Sufficient Freedom and Lead Lifes of Drudgery" (47). She demands that "Girls must be given more freedom. They must be put on the same basis as the boys" (47). One of her main concerns is forced marriage and so called 'May and December' unions between older men and very young girls. Citing a tragic case of a dreadful marriage and divorce between a 16 year-old girl and a 35 year old-man, Soloman adapts discourses of superior Christian civilization and modernity in contrast to Muslim backwardness to make her case:

> We are living in America. We have adopted America as our country—we must adopt her ideas, and live an American life. We must put away t'hose foolish ideas of the past and the Orient. We must give our girls the freedom which other girls in the world enjoy. We are a Christian nation, and a Christian nation treats the women the same as the men. Women are honored and respected. In a heathen country women are treated like dogs. We are not heathens. Do we not claim to be as civilized as any other nation? (48)

When her argument refers to a "heathen country" where "women are treated like dogs," Soloman invokes the oppressed Muslimwoman in opposition to American modernity. At the same time, her critique of Christian Syrian American double standards also implies that the community is not yet so far removed from "the Orient" as they claim, particularly in marriage and dating culture. Soloman notes that "Nine out of every ten girls go secretly and the tenth goes out openly. The nine girls who go out secretly do not enjoy themselves (…) The tenth girl enjoys a reputation" (48). However, she does not link these double standards to intersections of Christian and Muslim

patriarchies. Soloman rather paints this injustice as a generational problem in Syrian American circles, where parents do not understand life today and thus deprive their daughters, while they spoil their sons. Soloman points out that boys are favored and that parents then look down upon girls, which also leads to the situation that boys can have fun and then marry the 'good girl,' while girls who "enjoy" dating openly are then marked as wayward (49). She closes with a utilitarian pitch, arguing that if girls had the same freedom as boys, marriages would be based on a much better foundation of mutual understanding.

Soloman's arguments adapt crucial elements of the New Woman. Her call for full equality and sexual liberty for unmarried girls would have still been radical at the time, not just in Syrian but American communities at large. She simultaneously deploys imperial feminist frames, which framed modern womanhood as a pre-requisite for middle-class whiteness, and challenged Syrian American patriarchy. To manage this multiplicity of positions, Soloman resorts to Christianity to give her feminist intervention legitimacy. Her opposition of civilized/modern Syrian Christian womanhood hinges on the racializing slur that heathens, that is, Muslims, treated their women "like dogs." Soloman's adaptive agency draws on the specter of Muslim Otherness and of Christian civilizational superiority to make her message of sexual and gender equality more palatable to the local Syrian establishment. However, the ensuing controversy quickly reveals the limits of her adaptive agency in this intervention. She tries to position herself against the Muslimwoman trope, but her readers quite literally do 'not allow' her to claim Christian superior womanhood; on the contrary, as we will see below, she is disqualified for her "Moslem views."

Soloman achieved at least parts of her goals. She asked *The Syrian World* to print her letter and to open its pages as a platform for further discussions on this important issue, which they did. However, ad hominem attacks in the responses were swift and harsh. The February 1929 issue

included another 'Reader's Forum' and Soloman's most vocal opponent turned out to be Edna K. Saloomey. She entitled her comment as a "Strong Defense of Syrian Parents. Their Criticism Held Unjustified Impartial Opinion of American Social Worker Cited in Praise of Syrian Home Life" (Saloomey, "Strong" 44). Saloomey's response is deeply concerned with how Soloman's critique would be perceived by the wider public at large: "Even less flattering must be the effect on readers of other nationalities. To honor even in a very small way the splendid manner in which Syrians have acted in their capacity as parents is far more important" (44). Her comment also reflects the material reality of Syrian American womanhood being held accountable for representing the community in the US. Saloomey cites the opinion of an external social worker to further bolster her argument about how stellar Syrian American families treat their girls (45). Not only does an outside opinion weigh more, but this written testimony that social workers surveyed Syrian American families is an archival trace of how Americanization policies targeted Syrian Americans. In contrast to Cultural Pluralists, Americanization advocates focused on reforming immigrant mothers so that they would *not* harbor racial difference and traditions—thus facilitating the successful assimilation of the entire family (Irving 71-3). Housing authorities, social workers and educators held immigrant mothers accountable for raising modern/assimilated children, a social reality that is reflected here by Saloomey's anxious defense of Syrian parents.[52]

Just like the male contributors Mansur and Deab, Saloomey blames World War I "for many queer changes which have come about," noting that since "the war the so-called narrow path of right living seems to have widened into a five-line speedway" and that there "are, undoubtedly,

[52] When Americanizers (and Nativists) blamed immigrant mothers for the families' lack of assimilation, a central concern was that such 'failed families' would produce criminal sons and wayward daughters (Irving 90). Mary Soloman may position herself as a Syrian American New Woman, and as part of a modern, white, American middle-class; however, her call for sexual liberty could equally evoke the image of the 'wayward daughter' of an immigrant family and, what is more, even the dual trope of being a backward/hyper-sexual 'muslimwoman.' In short, not being respectable was immediately racialized.

many parents of other nationalities who are as unwilling as Syrian parents to accept all the changes" (44). Saloomey thus also emplaces the inner-Syrian debates around what constitutes modern womanhood as a 'normal' intergenerational struggle, shared by many parents, eschewing any racializing contexts. She then goes on to personally attack Soloman for hating all Syrian parents, and argues that the American right for self-expression has gone too far here. Saloomey concludes by positing that "another interpretation of freedom and right living which is acceptable to the older generation" (46) is possible: for example, going to concerts and plays. She fittingly ends by remarking that "Equality does not necessarily enhance a girl's charms" (46), displaying her voluntary submission to patriarchal ideals that would have been widely shared at the time. [53] Saloomey fully embraces the notion of a gradual increase in modernity and women's well-being, which may only happen insofar as they remain within codes of respectability.

Saloomey's letter is followed by another comment that makes the opposition between Syrian American women's respectability and the racializing stereotypes of backward Muslim womanhood even more explicit: Edna Shakar's "In Defense of the Syrian Girl" (46). Shakar describes herself as representative of the 'modern,' American-born Syrian generation, while Soloman's views disqualify her from such representative status: "Many of her views are wrong and quite Moslem, or she must have some sort of a complex" (46). Shakar takes offense at Soloman's criticism of 'May and December' unions in the *Christian* Syrian American communities and dismisses their existence, stating Soloman "is fifty years behind her time!" (46) In the next sentence, Shakar rejects Soloman's definition of modern womanhood as 'un-Syrian': "Maybe she means by following modern customs free love, companion marriage, divorce, etc." (46). For Shakar, modern Syrian American womanhood is characterized by the "cleanest morals

[53] The voluntary restriction of what this freedom may mean for proper Syrian American women is what Serene Kader would call an 'adaptive preference' from an anthropological point of view.

and fewest divorces" (47). Her dislike of companion marriage implicitly endorses arranged marriage as the preferred mode among Syrian American Christians, which then rather links than distances her community from Syrian Muslim traditions. This may partially explain her strong reaction to Soloman's critique and her attempt to position arranged marriages as an entirely Muslim problem. When it comes to unhappy Syrian American married girls, Shakar engages in outright victim blaming by stating that in her view no one forces a girl to marry and if a girl is dissatisfied, "why not analyze yourselves" (46). Finally, Shakar's positioning of Soloman as "too Moslem," that is, simultaneously behind her times and too modern in her demand for free love, adapts the Muslimwoman trope. The specter of Muslim womanhood serves here to disqualify anything that would be too oppressive *or* too liberal as non-Syrian, echoing indirectly the typical double-sidedness of orientalist harem stereotypes of hypersexual and oppressed Muslim women.

Shakar closes her letter by stating "Do not get the idea that I am a girl from the old country. I was born and educated in this country" (47). This demonstrates her 'modern' and 'Syrian American' credentials. Her response reflects how Syrian American women tried to adapt the seemingly impossible subject position of the model immigrant woman who is ascending into American modernity—not just via straightforward assimilation, but by embodying the traditional values of the community. Syrian American women appear thus to have been well aware of the contradictory demands made by Americanizers, Cultural Pluralists and community elders on what constitutes model Syrian American womanhood. However, when pressed to comment themselves, their immediate stakes were shaped far more by the racial politics of Syrian American respectability in opposition to the Muslimwoman as a possible stigma—backwards and hypersexual—applied to Syrian women as Arab immigrants. The emphasis on Christian piety and modernity against Islamic difference is also a strategic affinity to Anna Julia Cooper's black

orientalism—both use racializing specters of harems and of Muslim women's oppression to claim their own Christian respectability as cultural foundation for American citizenship.

Other than the fictional cautionary tale of *Anna Ascends*, Mary Soloman's opinion is one of the few explicit material representations of Syrian American women as sexual beings.[54] Despite the limited archival material, this controversy among Syrian American women in print reflects the transnational flows of imperial feminist arguments about modernity within migrant communities, as well as the ambivalence of women's self-representation. Adaptive agency facilitates here assertion of their own modernity through consumption and adaptation of hegemonic discourses, but the affective and political meanings of these adaptations do not resist negative stereotypes as such—rather, they use adaptive agency to manage their own positions within the given context. I hope to have shown here that, far from simply stabilizing the claim to Syrian whiteness, such adaptations were not uniform and situated themselves within a web of power relations that not everyone could access/deploy equally—Soloman's attempt at adapting a Christian rhetoric of modern womanhood in the end failed, because her fellow Syrian American women readers did not accept her interpretation of this subject position. Saloomey, on the other hand, emerged as the new leading voice for modern and respectable Syrian American womanhood from the marriage debates and established herself as regular contributor to *The Syrian World.*

[54] In a final comment on the case, in the May 1929 issue, another Syrian girl, Anna F. Shire, seeks to present a middle ground between the two opposing factions. In her comment on "Reconciling Viewpoints of Parents and Children. Girls are Restricted Beyond the Normal Supervision" she defends Soloman to some degree, especially with regard to the troublesome occurrence of May and December unions and overly protective Syrian parents of girls (40). However, Shire also defends the Syrian parents who "have struck a happy medium" (40). She advocates for an individual assessment in each case and for an intelligent discussion between parents and children. Shire also supports Soloman's claim that there are serious problems with freedom and that girls are kept from things that would be beneficial for their development, especially when boys are allowed to go out and understand the world themselves but girls are not. So Shire claims the right for girls to be exposed to the world (41), but always with the qualification that they need be fortified in character first to do so and not "run rampant" (42) with newfound freedom they are supposedly not prepared for.

In 1931, Saloomey published articles about Syrian food, hosting American guests, proper roasting, and advice on how ladies can use idle hours, actively engaging in the dissemination of pedagogies of respectability via the Syrian press. In February 1932 Saloomey then took over as an editor of the section on "Our Young Generation" from A. Hakim, the pseudonym Mokarzel himself used to publish on family affairs. In his explanation for the handover, Mokarzel casts Saloomey as "the more logical person to conduct the department because she is American born and retains nevertheless all those finer racial qualities that are characteristically Syrian" and offers "natural sympathy for her generation and her keen insight into their problems" ("Hard Times" 48). In the end, Saloomey's journalistic performance of a model Syrian American woman, resembling *Anna Ascends* in its focus on sexual purity and Syrian virtue, appears to be rewarded with a larger public voice and agency, endorsed by *The Syrian World*.

The newspaper itself was discontinued in 1932, but it had served as a distinct forum for women's voices in the marriage debates. Moreover, the Syrian American press was not the only force and medium that enabled women's participation in community formation. Women's clubs, such as the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston, were another, crucial cultural force. Indeed, Mary Soloman's controversial reader comment pitched its hope on their influence as well: she feels "confident that we are going to have this freedom soon, and especially with the rising tide of a United Federation of American-Syrian societies. I am sure that one of the purposes of the National organization, which I hope we will have in the near future, will be to promote understanding among our young people of both sexes" (49). While The Syrian Ladies Aid Society remained largely within bounds of respectability, as a women's organization it directly impacted the public and social lives of its members, expanding possibilities for "understanding" among the "young people

of both sexes" during the interwar years. Chapter three thus turns to another archive and a different mode of adaptive agency in Syrian American community formation through women's organizing.

Chapter 3 - The Clubwomen

The Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston: Adaptive Agency in Community Formation and Diaspora Politics

Evelyn Shakir vividly recalls her coming of age in the interwar years in Boston: "Arab Americans were joiners" (*Bint* 56) and among the varied, very active club life of Syrian Americans in Boston the "Ladies Aid Societies were sacred" (59). The Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston, founded in 1917, was central to the community's social life, facilitating ethnic identity formation and middle-class agendas in the interwar years. The Ladies became the backbone of the local community in multiple ways: they developed their own welfare system, dispensing food, coal and cash at their discretion; they served as mediators between state institutions and the community, accompanying Syrian immigrants to doctor's visits or court appointments; and they became a cultural pillar of the community. Through bazars, plays, suppers and other parties (weekly sahras, that is, house parties, and monthly haflis/dinners) they raised funds for their charitable work while establishing themselves, and their clubhouse, as the center for community affairs (61). The multifaceted potential for cultural agency in the subject position of a US clubwoman was not without its own limitations, but it offered a vantage point for shaping the developing norms of Syrian American womanhood in between the tensions of respectability and modernity.

The previous chapters have looked at the changes in ideals and representations of Syrian American womanhood in the early twentieth century. Sarah Gualtieri positions Afifa Karam (1900s) and Mary Soloman (1920s) as two emblematic figures that represent and embody different generations in these changes: While Karam, as a first-generation immigrant woman who grew up in the old country, embodied the 'modern' spirit of the *Arab* awakening, Soloman represents the generational shift toward defining women's modernity in *American* terms ("Between" 151).

Chapter two has analyzed in more detail how Syrian Americans adapted different racial and gendered layers of modernity, including the contradictory demands on immigrant women to represent traditional ideals as keepers of ethnic heritage *and* US national modernity. Working with Evelyn Shakir's archive on the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston as a case study, this chapter shows that these tensions also permeated Syrian American club life and traces developments in women's self-representation into the interwar years. Women's organizing offered a very different platform than the Syrian American press to negotiate approaches to modernity and respectability. The first generation of women engaged in the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston built a women's organization that not only delivered aid, but also expanded social circles and leadership opportunities for local women in the 1920s and 1930s. The Ladies developed a role model for a self-confident, publicly active *and* respectable kind of Syrian American womanhood, which also inspired the next generation of young Syrian American women to enter club life in the 1930s and 1940s.

Syrian American girls in Boston grew up with the Syrian Ladies Aid Society as a social force in town and in 1931, seven daughters of club members decided to form an auxiliary SLAS junior chapter. The Silver Jubilee Program of the Syrian Ladies' Aid Society (October 25th, 1942) contains an inspirational account of the foundation of the juniors (designed to promote their chapter to new members). The segment "Here Is How It Came About... And What Has Happened Since" recounts how, just like the seniors, the juniors engaged in charity, hospital visits, staging plays and the organization of social events—but under their own leadership and organizational responsibility. The text is full of youthful exuberance, and reflects a degree of self-confidence, stereotypically associated with 'modern American' womanhood, but deriving from their mothers' role model. They emphasize the success of their Annual Dance, "the talk of town for its social

and—what is more important—its financial success. Not once has an affair under the auspices of the Junior Chapter been a financial failure,—not once has an affair been anything but the climax to the social season of Syrian and Lebanese Boston" (Syrian Ladies Aid Society, "Silver"). The juniors' adaptation of the ideals and strategies embedded in their mothers' club womanhood and charity work reflects both intergenerational transfer and change. The senior Syrian Ladies broke new ground, establishing themselves as agents in local community formation through the wide-spread acceptance of charity as a 'womanly' occupation; however, by the 1930s and 1940s, the juniors' own reflections reveal their awareness of the limits of charity as a facilitating trope for 'modern' womanhood as well.

The Silver Jubilee program itself points to this unresolved tension between expected modesty and the need for self-assertion as community leaders: on the one hand, the juniors deflect personal gain as a motivation for their successful work, stating that "charity has its own reward." However, despite this initial deflection their program also credits their own role in the juniors' success too, as "of course it could be the fervor and zeal and wholehearted cooperation of all members also." The final comment encapsulates all the ambivalences of Syrian American club womanhood, which rested on the respectability of charity and yet used this platform to expand their personal agency and public reach: "Although unusual that girls should join a club which has charity as its only aim, it is not unaccountable, as many members have mothers in the Senior organization (…)" (Syrian Ladies Aid Society, "Silver"). Overall, there was a strong sense of mutual appreciation, and the seniors and juniors remained in close contact and supported each other. From the second-generation vantage point, though, not all girls considered the Ladies' work to be progressive or 'modern' anymore. Sophie Chadie Maluf, for example, remembers her mother's generation as purely dedicated to work and home life "and a little bit of charity they did.

This was the only thing they did outside the home. —E: Like the club? —S: The club. The Ladies Aid" (14). While she acknowledges the importance of the Ladies for her mother, she herself saw their activities as traditional, and by implication still domestic, charity work. Julia Sabbagh, a founding member of the junior chapter, even describes her own auxiliary as "the deadest alive club I know of" and lists the Mother's Day events, including a parade, food and the mother's secret enjoyment of aarak, as the highlights of their club activities (Sabbagh "May")—events that performed rather traditional, domestic ideals of motherhood than modernity.

Club womanhood as a charitable, womanly ideal thus did not appeal to the next generation of Syrian American women in the same way; and nationally, the women's club movement had already peaked and waned before the senior Ladies were even founded in 1917. However, I argue in this chapter that precisely in its limitations and ambivalences club womanhood offered Syrian American women, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, a distinct platform to engage in their community formation. Their work and the potential for adaptive agency in their self-fashioning as Syrian Ladies allowed them to draw on and actively inscribe their organization into legacies of US women's clubs, as well as the changing Syrian and US American national ideals of womanhood.

Syrian Ladies and US Women's Clubs

The first, and perhaps most obvious, trace of the Ladies' adaptive agency is the name of the society itself: the fact that they called themselves a 'Ladies Aid Society' rather than a 'women's club,' even though the Syrian Ladies Aid Society followed in the footsteps of the national women's club movement. In many ways, the foundation of the Syria Ladies in 1917 came at the tail end of the women's clubs' boom era on the national stage, which occurred between approximately 1880 and 1920. By 1917, the self-designation as a women's club would have thus been common-place.

In the following I argue that the choice to present themselves under the old-fashioned name of a 'Ladies Aid Society' was a deeply political decision that mitigated Syrian American racial ambivalence in relation to middle-class respectability. What is more, as an immigrant women's club, the Syrian Ladies had to position themselves in relation to both Syrian diaspora politics and domestic histories of women's organizations (and race). In both cases, the veneer of doing 'apolitical' charity work was instrumental to the public acceptance of a Syrian American women's organization with significant influence beyond domestic spheres. Here, the specific histories of US Ladies Aid Societies may have been a way for the Boston Syrian Ladies to write themselves into US American and Syrian national histories.

The first Syrian American women's club, the "Syrian Women's Union of New York," was founded in 1896 and adopted the name "Syrian Ladies Aid Society" in 1907 (Shakir, *Bint* 61). This club was run by upper-class Syrian New York women who dedicated themselves to charity, for example, the organization of nurseries for working Syrian mothers and support for incoming immigrants at Ellis Island. It is thus plausible to assume that the Boston Syrian Ladies Aid Society at least knew about this New York-based organization and may have adapted their name to their model. However, there are a few contextual factors that indicate the Boston Ladies' decision was shaped by more than their New York predecessor's example. First, the foundation of the Boston Ladies explicitly responded to a wartime situation and initially the women chose an entirely different name for their organization: Between 1917 and 1919 the Boston club women called their organization "Syrian War Victims" (Munkubeeyee Syria) (SLAS minutes #1).[55] These first two years of their charitable work focused on war relief overseas. A quarter of Syria's population died of hunger during the World War I. The Ottoman empire fought alongside the Germans, and the

[55] In-text citations to the SLAS minutes henceforth refer to the number (#) of each entry only.

allied forces enacted a naval blockade of the Syrian coast. The Ottomans further confiscated the available foods for their army, leaving the people to starve (*Bint* 32). The foundation of their organization in November 1917 responded directly to this humanitarian crisis.

After the end of the war, the women began to turn to local charity work, in addition to continuous attention to possible crisis and disasters in the old country. This new orientation also offered the opportunity to re-think their organization. In a meeting in October 1919, they "discuss change of name of club. Decide to become Society to help all S and L wherever. Here or in o.c.… [old country] Here, but there when needed. Still going on as it does. Name_SLAS_ and those who don't speak English, they will be interpreted for (D.H. [Denison House], hospital)" (# 44). This spirit of non-sectarianism and the trans/national scope of their charity work influenced the Ladies' decision to rename themselves as a society in 1919. The women used 'Syrian' as an umbrella term that could refer to all the ethnic communities of the region and they very clearly stated in their first meeting that they wanted all of the Syrian community in Boston to join, not just specific church members, so there would also be no excuses for refusing to support their charitable work. The emphasis on "society," geared at Syrian audiences, then communicated non-sectarianism. This may partially explain the choice of the term "society" over "club." However, at the same time, "society" was also a much safer, less overtly political, choice in the larger US context as well.

As Paula Giddings notes, one "of the earliest White women's clubs was founded in response to the exclusion of women journalists from the New York Press Club in 1868. The consequent founding of the Sorosis Women's Club set a general pattern for these organizations" (93). Giddings attributes to such women's clubs a distinct political intention, fighting against "exclusion from occupations and other activities for which their education and background had prepared them" (93). The fact that many other organizations chose self-designations as women's

clubs rather than ladies' societies during the movement's boom years around 1900 also "represented a political statement because lady had long indicated higher class position, and women echoed the term new woman, which connoted social change" (Gere 7). In addition to class and politics, the notion of ladyhood was also deeply racialized. As mentioned in previous chapters, Victorian ideals of True Womanhood, ideals that determined acceptance into the "pantheon of ladyhood" (Giddings 43), became synonymous with white, upper-class womanhood. Black women's clubs were thus in a contradictory position, as they embraced the moral ideals of ladyhood, but challenged its racism (43-4). For the Syrian American women, however, the middle-class appeal, and implied whiteness, of the term "Ladies" may have been a decisive factor. They were not seeking to make a feminist statement, and yet they engaged in empowering forms of self-organization. The frame of ladyhood could mitigate this political edge, while asserting white respectability.

However, why did the Ladies choose the specific name "Ladies *Aid* Society"? There are no explicit comments on this choice in the minutes, but contextual remarks at least hint at how adaptive agency—drawing on a more general understanding of what a US Ladies Aid Society stood for—could have influenced the Ladies in this matter. First, the Ladies relate the rationale for their foundation not just to Syrian needs, but also to the US American wartime patriotism at large: "When we saw American people helping, we wanted to help too" (#1). The minutes reflect a certain wartime spirit and rhetoric, denouncing the naysayers who did not believe the money would reach Syria, and they also specifically started their charity drive on a Tag Day, November 24th—that is, a day earmarked by president Wilson for charities to collect money. When the Ladies decided to officially incorporate in 1919, they stressed that they wanted to "register with city like any other charitable organization" (#45). In 1919, of course, the war had already ended. Hence the

Ladies had to "re-brand" themselves to reflect their increased domestic focus, but the memory of the war and the need for war relief were still fresh in their minds too. These two factors seem to have been decisive in their choice to adapt the name "Ladies Aid Society"—a name for women's charitable organizations that has very specific origins in the American Civil War.

Before the Civil War, women's organizing centered around temperance, suffrage, abolition and religious causes. The war effort, however, re-centered most women's organizations' work, North and South. Women formed Ladies Aid Societies to support soldiers. In the North, women helped improve sanitary conditions, worked as fundraisers and nurses, in orphanages and in war industries. In the South, women were closer to the front lines, engaging directly in the maintenance of war infrastructures, encouraging morale, providing food and clothes, burying the dead and caring for the sick. Ladies Aid Societies continued to operate after the war, and their wartime experience also changed their sense of self/public roles for women. Southern Ladies Aid Societies tended to reinvent themselves as memorial associations (Cox 96), while the Northern Ladies shaped the perceived universal values of American womanhood—claiming not only victory, but a certain sense of Northern moral superiority grounded in ideals of female self-sacrifice, service to the nation and charitable work for communities (Attie, *Patriotic* 3-4). Affiliating themselves with Ladies Aid Societies, rather than women's clubs, thus connotated the Syrian Ladies' focus on war relief (and service to the Syrian as well as US American nation) rather than suffrage, which would have been a central political concern of many women's organizations in 1919. The ideal of female self-sacrifice was further a Christian virtue that also linked US and Syrian American nationalist ideals of womanhood.

In addition to these US-specific historical frames, the name change may also have responded to the immediate political concerns of Syrians as a diaspora community. 1919 marked

the year that frustrated Syrian hopes for unity and independence after the war. Syrian American delegates had been present at the Paris Peace Conference to lobby for an American protectorate over Syria to escape Ottoman oppression. US-based clubs, like the Syrian American Club, even founded the New Syria National League to fight for this cause (Syrian American Club). However, the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement crushed all such aspirations and the Syrian territories were divided between France, Britain and Russia. Hani Barwardi's research on the transnational, political relations of early Arab American clubs and institutions documents that the fate of Syria, parallel to concerns about Zionist settlements in Palestine, was a core political cause that united various organizations in the interwar years. At the same time, such political lobbying for Syria was also grounded in a very pragmatic sense of belonging to the US American political sphere that in turn facilitated their own political weight as *American* Syrians. During both World Wars Syrian American criticism of US politics had to be suspended and most organizations professed undivided loyalty, but their "full ascription to Americanism" could also be seen as "the culmination of an evolution of strategies of political activism on behalf of beleaguered Syria" (Bawardi 5). The history of Arab American political organizing and lobbying in the US for overseas causes is characterized by frustrations and limited success, but these ambitions, and the relative optimism about the empowering potential of their American citizenship, would have also shaped how the Syrian Ladies adapted dominant tropes of Syrian/American womanhood in 1919.

Building and expanding upon the insights of Bawardi, whose research concentrates on men's organizing, I suggest reading the adaptation of the name "Syrian Ladies Aid Society" also in this context of post-war, trans/national politics. For example, in 1918 a speaker from another Syrian American club, Gema Surie, visited the Ladies. He lectured that Syria should not be divided and become an American mandate. The minutes record that he explicitly posited that women could

play an equally important role in these efforts (#31). Shortly after this lecture, in October 1919, the Ladies took the decision to rename themselves; in November, they received a "Letter from Syr-Am Club [sic], want committee to discuss tragedy, partition of S" (#45). That the letter arrived after the name change suggests that the change may have reflected the women's continuing hopes for US support of the Syrian cause. In this light, their choice to work as a "Ladies Aid Society" was an act of adaptive agency that emplaced the Ladies in a specific legacy of patriotic US American women's war time organizing, while their focus on "Syrian" needs disregards national and ethnic boundaries as it encompasses both the old country and Syrian Americans.

Even though the Syrian Ladies did not designate themselves as a women's club officially, they nevertheless referred to themselves casually as a 'club' in their minutes, and they bore all the hallmarks of women's clubs of their day. Generally speaking, women's clubs were organizations that formed around political, cultural and/or social causes, ranging from political agitation for women's suffrage to charity work. The Syrian Ladies Aid Society was only one organization, but operated with a range of committees, from aid work to entertainment, which allowed them to manage diverse purposes (poverty relief, legal issues and family crisis) and activities (hospital visits and charity) united within one woman's club. On its surface, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society could be considered a primarily social club and a typical immigrant women's association. Focused on serving their local community, the Ladies came into their own in the 1920s and 1930s and shaped the formation of the Boston Syrian American community. After 1924, when no more new immigrants came from the old country and the second generation of American-born Syrians came of age, the need to define a Syrian American ethnic identity became even more pressing. The Syrian Ladies contributed to this process as a women's organization. For the most part, they did not explicitly engage in suffrage activism or interracial organizing, but focused rather, as Evelyn

Shakir notes, on establishing their women's club as a safe and familiar space for immigrants in a foreign world ("Good" 133).

In short, the Syrian Ladies operated within the larger sphere of immigrant women's self-organizing. Anke Ortlepp's research on various German American women's clubs in Milwaukee at the turn of the twentieth century identifies common concerns and issues among immigrant women's clubs, most notably the preservation of ethnic identities, language and 'homeland' culture.[56] The Syrian Ladies shared many of these concerns. However, despite all these commonalities, their position as a Syrian American women's club—representing oriental/Arab immigrants with all the racial connotations outlined in the previous chapters of this dissertation—puts them in a distinctly different relationship to US gendered and racial hierarchies compared to German American or other Euro American women. Direct references to race in the club minutes are rare, but in one instance the Ladies noted with satisfaction the publication of a "piece from Boston American apparently contradicting [sic] earlier piece that attacked Syrians as members of the Yellow race" (#45). The Ladies were thus likely aware that their public image was constantly in danger of being conflated with other Asian immigrants, despite their access to US citizenship as Christian Syrian Americans and proximity to whiteness. I thus analyze the Syrian Ladies' use of adaptive agency, through the multi-facetted figure of the clubwoman, as a way in which they mitigated their racial ambivalence as immigrant women and US citizens as well.

[56] German American women started by organizing themselves into auxiliaries for the male Turner associations. This choice positioned within accepted gender hierarchies as "help mates" (Ortlepp 431) to the men's club. However, in doing so they nevertheless challenged their roles as mothers and wives only, expanding their sphere of influence as active agents in the community formation. Some smaller, independent women's clubs in the freethinker movement also supported suffrage activism, but overall activities of German American clubs focused on the preservation of German culture—and clubs also sent aid to Germany during World War I (431-5).

As mentioned above, the subject position of a clubwoman was inherently ambivalent, tearing down any semblance of discrete private/public spheres or modern/traditional ideals of womanhood.[57] Political agency was both facilitated and circumscribed by its grounding in motherhood and domestic duties (Knupfer 48). Overall, women's clubs were a serious cultural force. In all their varied endeavors, "club members carried out cultural work that aided a refashioning of the nation" (Gere 5). In doing so, the figure of the clubwoman could not but also engage with US racial imaginaries. Even for white protestant women, philanthropic work could not always protect women's clubs from being stereotyped as anti-men or unwomanly. White clubwomen had to defend themselves against male backlash, but they could ignore their own complicity in perpetuating racial hierarchies. The stakes of such attacks on women's public legitimacy and personal respectability were significantly higher for working class, African or Jewish American club women (Gere 31-3).

In executing and promoting their activities, clubs negotiated both imagined womanhoods and racial politics, as they had to adapt their rhetoric and self-representation to the ever-shifting, national norms for respectable womanhood (Knupfer 13). Anne Meis Knupfer argues that African American clubwomen were keenly aware of the racial politics inherent in their self-representation and used "adaptive language" (28) to, on the one hand, assert themselves as a political force in the public sphere and, on the other, emphasize respectability and domesticity internally to not drive away new members. Building on Knupfer's approach to 'adaptive language,' adaptive agency

[57] Women's clubs were "intermediate institutions located between the family and the state" (Gere 13). As organizations they tore down any semblance of a public/private dichotomy: they created intimate spaces for women to educate themselves, form new relationships and to extend themselves into the public sphere. Despites its seeming explanatory power as a metaphor, the scholarship of the "No More Separate Spheres!" special issue in *American Literature* in 1998 thoroughly challenges a gender binary in the vision of nineteenth century public/private spheres (Davidson 445). Women's clubs are a case in point for the limited explanatory powers of separate spheres and the multiple intersections between gender, race and class shaping women's public agency.

offers a broader conception of such negotiations that includes language and discursive arguments as well as women's embodied/performative acts of self-representation in their club work. For the Syrian Ladies Aid as a women's club, adaptive agency came into play in the promotion of their community outreach as well as in conflicts over their club status with the men of the community and their cultural/curatorial work. What is more, they also performed theater plays and hosted movie screenings. Such events did not just raise money for charity; I argue below that the Ladies used adaptations of stage plays to support certain political positions and gendered ideals without appearing overtly political themselves. In sum, I read archival traces of the Syrian Ladies not just as a history of a women's club or of individual women's lives, but as performative practices that used different forms of adaptive agency to carry out the cultural work of community building, trans/national Syrian American identity formation and racial self-fashioning.

To understand why the trope of the clubwoman offered the Syrian Ladies such a rich resource for self-fashioning, we need to briefly look at the pre-histories of the national women's club movement between 1890 and 1920—and their racial politics. The decades before 1920 were dominated by the quest for suffrage, racial tension between white and black women's clubs, and the fading of Victorian gender ideals. The prospect of black women's suffrage brought white women's racism into sharp relief in the club movement as well. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, founded in 1890, refused to accept African American members. White Protestant women's fight against sexual double standards and for new social roles did not shy away from using eugenic and overtly racialized logics, if it served their cause. Many women's clubs in the GFWC saw themselves as representative of the nation's progress, encapsulated in the trope of the New Woman and all its imperial/racist legacies detailed in the previous chapter.

Black women challenged these exclusions on multiple levels. The clubwoman, as a dominant figure on the US cultural scene, may have been, as Anne Ruggels Gere notes, implicitly coded white and middle-class, "thereby erasing the varying class, racial, and ethnic/religious backgrounds represented in the club movement" (3). However, black women's clubs quickly became a force to be reckoned with as well. Initial experiences with both the potential of women's organizing, demonstrated by white women's clubs, and the frustrations of exclusion and discrimination of black women's organizing—for example, by the white women organizers at the Chicago World Fair—triggered an explosion in black women's club life. Founded in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women grew to represent over 1000 clubs and 28 federations during the next twenty years. Prominent African American clubwomen, such as Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams, became public representatives for black women's needs, reaching beyond black male concerns about racial uplift and white women's narrow feminisms (Giddings 79-91). While there were cases of interracial solidarity between clubs, particularly when it came to suffrage, the histories of the failures of such cooperation further highlight the distinct challenges black club women faced.[58]

[58] Black women activists had to fight for their suffrage at a time when the right of black men to vote was under siege. The rise of white supremacist politics in the 1890s directly aimed at the disenfranchisement of African American men's vote. Black women's activism, and tenuous interracial connections with the white women's suffrage movements, thus fought a double battle against segregation and for voting rights (Gilmore). Paula Giddings further notes that black women's contribution to the passage of the 19th amendment was little acknowledged, but essential. White suffragists, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to advocate for limited suffrage for educated—by implication white—women, in order to win the support of Southern women's clubs and male representatives. This strategy of "expediency" (120) was supposed to extend the vote to white women first and to black women later, but black activists never had any illusions about the profoundly racist and classist implications of this proposal. Between 1917 and 1920 more and more states began passing suffrage bills, and for a brief moment white suffragists sought the cooperation of black women's clubs to pass bills in embattled states like Tennessee. Eventually the national amendment passed in August 1920, but black women in the South had to continue to fight to exercise their right to vote (157).

Anti-suffragette rhetoric drew heavily on nineteenth-century ideals of True Womanhood to disparage white women's activism, but for black women the stakes were even higher. African American respectability politics, deeply entangled with women's clubs, fought against public stigma and the potential for physical attacks on black women perceived as immoral/licentious. Black women activists hoped universal suffrage would give them enough political weight to fight sexual exploitation, improve educational opportunities and access to labor markets and unions (115-7). While the fight for such basic rights would continue until the civil rights era (and beyond), the moment of national prominence for club women, before the 19th Amendment passed, offered a degree of cultural capital to black women that allowed them to challenge their exclusion from both the movement and the public sphere in new ways. Black women activists, artists, educators, and writers assumed positions of influence at the turn to the twentieth century, while local women's clubs on the ground worked toward alleviating poverty, supporting black working-class women.

It is important to note here that the African American women's club movement was not a homogenous front either. Class and social differentiation stratified its clubs in addition to different outlooks on women's roles in racial politics. Knupfer's case studies of the African American women's clubs in Chicago detail how clubwomen's charity for the poor demarcated social status and functioned as a form of cultural capital—elite women saw themselves as embodying W.E.B. DuBois' notion of the 'Talented Tenth,' while club activities geared at working class African American women instead emphasized Booker T. Washington's ideals of home economics and frugality. Subsequently, political agency in African American women's clubs emerged in many different forms, from active lobbying for prison reform to seemingly apolitical whist clubs. However, even purely social, upper-class organizations had political and economic impact. Their

"genteel performance" (127) asserted African American middle-class status and the social events supported local businesses.

The Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston had a different position in US racial hierarchies and as an individual, immigrant women's club it cannot be directly compared to the multifaceted African American women's club movement.[59] However, there is a point of convergence in how the Syrian Ladies' class status and social orientation shared the performative claim to middle-class Americanness in genteel performances. I read the political impact of such performances and the visible presence of upper-class African and Syrian American clubwomen as an affective re-orientation of exclusionary norms through the women's adaptive agency. Their embodied self-representation, and adaptation of repertoires of respectability, makes the otherwise implied 'whiteness' of these norms visible as a construction. In both cases, Syrian and African American women's self-representation could challenge exclusionary racial premises without overtly critiquing norms of respectability. For example, the Syrian Ladies also held whist parties (#255) and their events raised money for poor Syrian Americans, while they continuously stressed the 'apolitical' nature of their charity work. As clubwomen, though, the Syrian Ladies had a public, representative function. African American upper-class women could not escape black stereotypes and would be held accountable for the "entire race" (Giddings 79); the Syrian Ladies would have faced a similar representative burden toward orientalist and anti-immigrant stereotypes. Race and

[59] As an *immigrant* women's club race played a specific role in their self-fashioning beyond the domestic community context as well. Catering to the poor in the old country, race appeared in the sense of ethno-religious difference. The Syrian Ladies responded to these religiously inflected intra-Syrian ethno-nationalisms with fervent non-sectarianism, a strong political statement. The Ladies were adamant that they would help all Syrians and Lebanese, regardless of their backgrounds. This did not please everyone in the Boston community: they mention a fund-raising encounter when a man asked: "do they help Syria or Lebanon—both? Feed Druze children—all hungry children" (#12). This man then did not donate, but in their transnational outlook the Ladies refused to entertain ethno-racial hierarchies (Their view of Muslim Syrians remains unclear, they were never explicitly mentioned).

its intersections with the US repertoire of respectability thus shaped the public conditions of possibility for both African and Syrian American clubwomen in this context.

Building on the case studies on repertoires of respectability in Syrian American family portraits in chapter one, there is thus also a strategic affinity in Syrian and African American women's clubs' self-representation. Neither African nor Syrian American clubwomen could afford to neglect ideals of home and motherhood—a failure on the home front would immediately stigmatize the entire community as barbaric/backwards and could have invoked the ever-present specter of hyper-sexuality. Many Syrian and African American women were working in jobs outside the home, making access to the representative status of domestic respectability harder. The position as a clubwoman, however, offered them access to a new form of public respectability that validated women's work (albeit not working-class women per se) as compatible with the more traditional spheres of white, middle-class respectability. Without positing equal stakes and circumstances, African and Syrian American clubwomen's adaptive agency had to negotiate their public positions *outward*, in relation to the exclusionary frame of white club womanhood, and *inward*—in their efforts to recruit new members and to ensure acceptance of their work within their local communities (Knupfer 17-21). The need to demonstrate respectability and the multiplicity in audiences thus played an important role for both Syrian and African American clubwomen.

Besides these larger, strategic affinities, motherhood, literacy and modernity were three of the dominant tropes that defined respectable club womanhood in different ways for black and Syrian women. African American women, still facing legacies of slavery that denied black women autonomy as mothers, had a unique relationship to these three terms. For example, African American clubs in Chicago specifically adapted ideals of Republican motherhood—the national

function of mothers who raise future citizens—and merged this national ideal with African American traditions of "other mothering" (12): that is, taking care of extended families and other children during slavery. The local women's clubs translated this practice into running nurseries and kindergartens for working African American mothers. Further, with the assertion of literacy and the capacity to self-organize, African American women had to prove 'civility' to counter overtly racist assumptions of primitivism. As (tenuously) white women, the Syrian Ladies could depart from a representative claim to domesticity/motherhood and literacy in ways that African American women could not. Yet, as non-European immigrants, race continued to shape their club womanhood as well. The most pronounced convergence between Syrian and African American club women's representative stakes here is their positioning against the racial connotations of modernity: African 'primitivism' and oriental 'backwardness.'

African American club women, like Fannie Barrier Williams, were keenly aware that they had to embody and represent "progress" (Giddings 93), and Williams began to position herself outspokenly as an African American New Woman. If the New Woman was meant to denote progress, then African American women were the quintessential American New Women as embodied testaments to their progress after the end of slavery. African American women's clubs used adaptive agency to revise and change the ideal of the New Woman so it would encompass racial diversity (Bergman 245-7). These revisions—and the success of black club women in establishing their public visibility—changed the ideal of the clubwoman in ways that could not be reduced to Anglo womanhood anymore by the 1920s. The Syrian Ladies could thus draw on the capaciousness of club womanhood as an emblem of national inclusion into Americanness beyond race *and* adapt a position as publicly active women that neither violated their communities' nor the nation's sensibilities of respectability. This flexibility was crucial to navigating the specific

ways Syrian American women were racialized through modernity/traditional binaries. Orientalist stereotypes cast all Arab women as backward and oppressed, while cultural pluralists, as outlined in chapter two, celebrated immigrant women as keepers of tradition and racial difference. The Syrian American male elites, in turn, wanted women to represent modernity, but not too much. As an immigrant women's club, dedicated to community service and social gatherings, the Syrian Ladies seemingly fulfilled the impossible demand to embody and represent respectable progress that did not breach with male and national sensibilities. Yet their assertion of Syrian American respectability, while disavowing US racial stereotypes, also changed *in their practices* what 'modernity' and 'womanhood' could mean in a specific 1930s Syrian American Boston context.

This 1934 invitation to one of the Ladies' annual dinners reflects these intersections between ethnic identity formation and the women's performance of middle-class respectability as an immigrant club:

> Delicious oriental dishes are prepared and served by women to whom cooking is an art. They are also a social center where East and West meet together, ideas are exchanged and new acquaintances made among the cultured Americans and Syrians. The relief work of this Society is very much needed specially in these hard days by the community and it is highly commended by State and City officials (Syrian Ladies Aid Society, "Invite").

The invitation reflects the multiple gendered and racial tropes the Ladies deployed in their public outreach. The emphasis on their cooking skills asserts their domestic credentials and womanly respectability as angels of the house, but it also adapts the commodifying, exotic appeal of

'oriental' dishes—characteristic for the consumer-oriented strand of US Orientalisms and auto-Orientalisms involving Syrian American businesses and church institutions. As a women's club, though, the Ladies did not resort to discursive or literary references to Arabian Nights themes as such—they adapted orientalist tropes through embodied practices: cooking, decorating and, especially in the early stages of their outreach, even performing 'Eastern' domestic hospitality themselves. Hannah Shakir, one of the founding members, recalls in an interview one of the first dinners hosted by the Ladies in 1917: "Then we began giving Arabic dinners at Denison House. American people liked our food. In one room, we served dinner, and in another upstairs we served Turkish coffee and pastries. All of us would dress in Eastern clothes" ("Mother II" 5).

The different layers of adaptive agency here highlight how complex the Ladies' negotiation of Syrian racial ambivalence was at the time. Hosting dinners in semi-public spaces, serving American guests as Syrian Ladies, could establish them as American clubwomen and immigrant Syrian women who were keepers of traditions. These 'traditions,' in turn, were not what cultural pluralists had imagined. It appears that the Ladies rather adapted a generic, US orientalist sense of Middle Eastern 'traditional culture'—blending Arabic food, Turkish coffee and 'Eastern' clothes. On the spectrum of respectability, such domestic performances were the opposite of belly dancing harem fantasies; however, there is a similarity in their approaches. In both cases women adapt already circulating US orientalist tropes that promise consumers access to different kinds of exotic, oriental Otherness. Not least, the gesture of inviting American audiences into intimate 'oriental'/womanly spaces, to promote a certain business or cause, strategically links adaptive agency as a practice in belly dancing shows and in the Syrian Ladies' dinners.

The 1934 invitation, however, also reflects that the Syrian Ladies Aid Society had become a well-established institution, and depended less on such overt auto-orientalist self-promotion over

time. At this point, there is no mention of Eastern dress anymore. The Ladies still offered oriental food as a performative aspect of Syrian hospitality but had clearly expanded their public agency far beyond hosting dinners for charity purposes only. The invitation immediately moves beyond food, stressing the socio-political function of the dinner and the Ladies' public agency as facilitators of cultural exchange between East and West. The specific reference to their guests as "cultured" Americans reflects an emphasis on a shared middle-class and education background, but it could also implicitly point out that the Syrian Ladies understood not *all* Americans would want to be their guests in the first place. Nativism and racial prejudice did not simply disappear after 1924, and as successful immigrants and Syrian American women, the Ladies would not only have attracted sympathy. In this light, it is remarkable that the Ladies explicitly hosted and conducted business over dinner with city officials. By the 1930s, the Society had become so well established that their relief work mediated between state support and their Boston community's needs, receiving official recognition for their efforts during and after the Great Depression. Syrian heritage still functions here as a form of cultural capital attractive for outside audiences *and* as a marker of respectability toward the community. The Syrian Ladies do not emphasize ideals of modernity as such to fight the racializing stigma of oriental backwardness, but in their practices as clubwomen they establish themselves as agents in the public sphere. Perhaps most importantly, the multiple ambivalences of the clubwoman as a subject position offered Syrian American women of Boston a source for self-fashioning that could emplace them as American and Syrian women at the same time.

Their local success as a women's organization allowed the Ladies to celebrate Syrian cultural heritage and its complete compatibility with American citizenship. As immigrant women they were still racialized, but as clubwomen the Ladies used their status to reframe potentially

racializing encounters as opportunities for cultural exchange—as shown in the 1934 invitation above. Another common occurrence, noted in club minutes, was that American ladies, presumably white Protestant women, came to visit the club specifically to learn about Syrian "ways and traditions" (#15). From the beginning, then, the Ladies were asked to represent 'Syrianness' to American publics specifically as clubwomen. Another example dates to April 1918, when an "Am woman told pres. That a big fair would be held, each nationality having a room to display what they're proud of in own culture" (#45). This representative status meant a latent racialization as immigrants, but eventually turned into institutional power as well. As an organization with ties to the old country they helped people who wanted to return home; indeed, state officials began contacting the Ladies, as a representative Syrian immigrant organization, to assist Syrian immigrants caught at their port of entry (#633). The final section of this chapter explores their trans/national political relationships in more detail, but first I revisit Evelyn Shakir's archive and work on the SLAS through the lens of clubwomen's adaptive agency.

The Evelyn Shakir Collection Revisited

In this chapter, I work with the extraordinary archival material in the Evelyn Shakir collection: oral histories by SLAS founding members, club documents (invitations, programs, and correspondence), and newspaper articles, as well as the minutes from the Syrian Ladies Aid Society from 1917 until 1949 (just before World War II minutes begin to fragment). Alongside Alixa Naff, Evelyn Shakir was one of the pioneering scholars in the field who realized the urgency of collecting oral histories of elderly first generation Syrian Americans during the 1970s and 1980s. Shakir's interviews focus specifically on the lives of Syrian women as immigrants and include SLAS founding members. These oral histories document the women's memories about

their departure from Syria, arrival in the US, and their work and family life in the emerging Syrian American community. Shakir pays special attention to marriage practices and changes in dating culture and she asks, where applicable, what these women contributed to the SLAS—and what the society meant to them. Overall, Shakir's work aims at representing the diverse experiences and identities of Arab American women in order to fight against monolithic stereotypes about Arab womanhood. At the same time, her fieldwork challenges the archival invisibility of women's contributions to Syrian American community formation. Shakir's archival collection is a recovery project that revolves around explicitly reclaiming the forgotten histories and specific experiences of Syrian women as first-generation immigrants (*Bint* 33).[60] My dissertation shares Shakir's research goals and offers a new perspective on the many stories and histories her collection can tell about early Syrian American women's cultural agency as clubwomen.

Shakir's interest in the SLAS history was deeply personal. Her own mother Hannah was a founding member, and the archive holds extensive interviews featuring Hannah Shakir's recollections of those early days. Shakir herself, as an English professor and second-generation Syrian-Lebanese American, only realized as an adult that she had grown up surrounded by these women's club activities, and that they were of high historical significance ("Good" 134). She then began researching both the club's history and the understudied histories of first generation Syrian American women's daily lives through interviews. Shakir extracted the specific information about

[60] While most Syrian women emigrated with their families, Shakir emphasizes that there were also single women leaving homes to better their situation, and that this happened for a variety of reasons: for example, seeking financial independence or escaping bad marriages. Shakir stresses that these women's independent agency and initiatives have been ignored. Hardships during World War I had also further strengthened women's self-sufficiency, but at the same time the culture of male guardianship remained strong both in the homeland and the diaspora. Even early feminists like Afifa Karam worried that newly arriving 'beautiful' women may succumb to prostitution or lead already married men into temptation. Nevertheless, the fact that women could make money, not just as peddlers but also in textile industries in the Northeast and as shop keepers, encouraged female emigration and kept the boundaries between public and private spheres fluid (*Bint* 28—34).

the SLAS and published the first historical account of the SLAS as a book chapter, "Good Works, Good Times," in Eric Hoodlund's *Crossing Waters* (1987). She continued her work and her book *Bint Arab* (1997) then offered a much more detailed overview of the interviewee's life stories. The book included references to the SLAS but also offered much more insight into the personal experiences of Syrian American women. In this chapter, I will not retrace individual stories of founding members, but shift the analytical perspective to the cultural work of the SLAS as a women's club and the ways adaptive agency, via the representative status as 'Syrian Ladies,' allowed these women to manage their location in the complex layers of Syrian American ethnic, gender and community formation.

Before I continue, I would like to emphasize that the rich archival material in the Shakir collection is still underexplored and offers many more avenues for future research than presented in this chapter: for example, the specific kinds of charity work these Boston women engaged in, or a more detailed account of the club's relationships with city and state institutions. Within the scope of my focus on women's adaptive agency, I am specifically interested in how the intersections of charity and respectability, as two central tenets of a clubwoman, allowed the Syrian Ladies to navigate the demands of US racial politics and community formation. Charity, a productively ambiguous framework, allowed the women to unite many otherwise potentially contradictory positions. Despite the widespread acceptance of charity as a womanly occupation, Shakir contends that the initial endeavor was "a risky venture, an exercise in public and, therefore, potentially unwomanly behavior" (*Bint* 62). The Syrian Ladies shared this ambivalent relationship to respectability through charity with the general perception of the clubwoman. Gere notes that "Clubwomen understood the complexity of their political position, and their texts often reflect a keen awareness at the criticism continually leveled at them" (10). To mitigate the charge of

selfishness, they framed their aspirations toward self-improvement in terms of service to others. Media and male commentators attacked clubs for harming homes and motherhood, which in turn triggered the need to affirm respectability on behalf of the women's organizations (7-13).

Shakir's analysis of the Syrian Ladies' history picks up on this tension. She focuses her interpretation mainly on the ambivalent role of *male* family members and friends who supported a *women's* club as honorary members. The Syrian Ladies strategically mobilized such male support for the club to lend it legitimacy, navigating the Syrian culture of male guardianship and the US standards of respectability at the same time. In return, charity also served as an acceptable framework for men who were willing to help, but still felt they needed to justify their support of the women's public roles. For example, the women produced their own plays and appeared in male roles during female-only productions, despite the moral stigma of stage acting.[61] In the name of charity, male family members condoned such bending of the rules regarding respectability, as long as it made money for the club ("Bint" 63). Another factor here was that of the twenty-five women active in the early days, half were young, self-supporting and unmarried, while the other half were older, married homemakers ("Good" 139). Neither the young, childless nor older, established women had to worry about childcare duties or a bad reputation for supposedly neglecting their homes due to club work. Shakir further notes that the power of the elder women also reflects on their own assertiveness, which they had developed during Lebanese village life and in coming to the US.[62] Through charity, the Ladies could uphold traditional roles, but also push boundaries.

[61] Hannah Shakir recalls how nervous they were before their first, public performances and they "were afraid the men men (sic) that came would listen to the music, drink, and get drunk. (…) And people would say, "a ladies' club and they have such goings-on!" ("Mother II" 6). However, nothing of this sort transpired and the event proved very successful. "It was so successful we did it again" (6). Initially these productions required the support of male family members, but eventually the Ladies Aid established themselves as a cultural institution that would manage which cultural production could be shown in the Boston area.

[62] Generally speaking, Shakir describes the Ladies as holding a monopoly on social activities and charities in Boston, which she considers a form of "social activism" based on "economic activism" ("Good" 138).

Finally, the club's strategic inclusion of male stakeholders facilitated their acceptance in the community, even though women always remained in charge. The Ladies grew to a membership of up to four hundred during the 1920s and 1930s, offering women a guilt-free way to exercise power in the public sphere and, no less important, to access entertainment and new social spaces—likely one of the reasons for the strong affective links of the members to their Ladies Aid Society (137-41).

In the following, I expand upon how the ambivalences inherent to charity and respectability shaped the Syrian Ladies' formation, and adaptive agency, as an immigrant women's club. Charity was easily compatible with religious piety and other 'traditional' gendered ideals of women's domestic virtues, while a charitable framework allowed the Syrian Ladies to organize themselves largely outside the immediate confines of male guardianship. Their work still depended on male consent, but the more successful the Syrian Ladies became the more they could define the terms of their club womanhood—especially the balance between charity and social events—on their own. This shift in power, the Ladies' declaration of independence from male guardianship in

From Shakir's perspective, it was Syrian women's economic independence in the US, working outside the house, as peddlers, in stores and factories, that enabled a form of public agency as "something most of them could not have done in the old country!" ("Good" 138). Akram Khater, as detailed in chapter two of this dissertation, highlights that Syrian American women's public roles in the workforce and through charitable activities were not a break, but rather an extension of the traditions Syrian women had already established in the old country. He describes how women were not only working in Syrian silk factories since the 1830s, but also how they used rituals, community festivals and social visits to expand their public reach in a patriarchal society. After they lost their initial shyness, the Ladies assumed similar public roles in the Boston community. They built community through house parties and spoke at weddings and funerals (#479). Rather than re-drawing an old/new country binary between where women's inclination for public agency came from, I argue it is evident that their specific club womanhood as immigrants drew from both contexts. Informal modes of engagement women knew from Syria were then institutionalized and developed further through the specific structures and functions of US women's clubs. The Ladies visited not just private homes, but also hospitals, managed liaisons in welfare questions between the city and the community, and maintained representative relations to clubs and dignitaries in the Northeast, as well as in the old country. The traditions of old country women's roles in charitable work and community outreach would have shaped the Syrian Ladies' ideals, but the development of the SLAS as a women's club, and even more specifically, as an immigrant women's club, was also formed by US specific contexts.

the Syrian American Boston community, is nowhere more apparent than in their handling of the club's first, major financial crisis.

Helen Ashook Sabbagh, one of the first treasures of the club, recalls the hard times for the community during the Great Depression. The Ladies received many requests for aid from both locals as well as from state institutions.[63] In all cases, the aid committee would go out and investigate the degree of need and the club would then decide if funds would be allocated: "And it was all done secretly. Nobody knew the people we helped. Because our people were proud" (16). Despite these semi-institutional processes, the Ladies had no written records of whom they had helped. While most community members fully supported the society, their success and agency in deciding over local welfare issues likely also attracted envy and opposition. The Ladies bought their own clubhouse early in 1929, which they turned into an unofficial unemployment center by 1931 (#308). By January 1932, the financial crisis caught up with the club itself. The bank that held all their deposits, had "closed temporarily" (#433) and they needed to front money for Christmas presents and for the taxes on the club house out of pocket. Soon thereafter, in February, "Father Fernaynee came to mtg. Asked to see our books. Snet [sic] by some people to see if the club is acting properly. We agreed. He found everything in order. Put it in writing—no wrong doing" (#439).

[63] In the 1920s they became an established part of the community, to the point that when the Great Depression hit the community after 1929 the city institutions, such as community health and family welfare (#430, #431), actively requested a steady cooperation with the Syrian Ladies to manage local needs. Their aid committee thus became increasingly powerful, as it was them who decided when to help and what constituted need according to their by-laws. The by-laws defined the purpose of the society as "to help victims of war in S&L uring [sic] the war, and after that, as long as there is need. 2. After the War, the society will keep working to help the need Ss (in Boston)" (#36). The by-laws further state that no money must be spent on other purposes that these and that any future changes to the by-laws may not contradict its original purpose.

Faced with 'rumors' and critique from the community, the Ladies considered changing their practices, such as recording the names of beneficiaries "(perhaps in response to criticism in community)" (#440) or heeding men's advice more (#433). Eventually, though, they decided to maintain confidentiality and to go on the offensive. They invited a range of respected priests to come and check their books in May and June of 1932, and then introduced a series of innovations, such as separate accounts for the club house and their charity activities, they limited time periods of welfare assistance to eight weeks and began naming beneficiaries internally (but not to outsiders). Despite all these efforts, rumors continued to haunt the Ladies' reputation. In 1933 the former landlord of their club house, and other male elite members of the community, insisted on checking their books as well. The Ladies made a point that they were not forced but volunteered to open up their books to scrutiny, and sent their own members to join the committee (# 450-6).

Elias Saleem Maloof acted as chairman of the investigative committee and, together with Georg Khoury as secretary, he published a report entitled "The Truth Must Be Known" about how the Ladies supposedly failed to account for all their expenses. These self-described "notables of the Syrian colony" frame themselves as "respectable Syrians," which also implies that the Syrian Ladies Aid Society were after all not part of these respectable circles. The report claimed that they did not seek to discredit the Ladies and, in the end, also this report could not prove wrong-doing either. However, the tone was clearly intended to harm their reputation. Maloof and Khoury asserted that there was no polite way to solve the problem, so they were "obliged to solve the problem openly," and that the "public interest of the Syrian People has urged us to investigate what was thought imaginary but which has proven to be true." The truth this report claimed to present was not related to the Ladies' accounting as such: "We do not say the Society misconducted its

affairs." Rather, the men took issue with the club life itself as an avenue for women's entertainment and public outreach, by denying the Ladies' their claim to charitable womanhood:

> It seems that this amount (a balance of 22,616 Dollar) was extravagantly used by the Society in the ways of expenses from 1922-32. (The Actions of any Society, whether charitable or benevolent which spends two-thirds of what it collects should not be called charitable. [)] It would have been more proper for the Society to use AT LEAST HALF for her charitable work, but we leave that to your judgment (Maloof and Khoury).

This interpretation of the club's finances seems to willfully misinterpret the nature of the expenses for the Ladies' charitable work through social events. The club members meticulously documented and justified every expense and often themselves donated food, decorations and other items for house parties and dinners. The report's main aim was to discipline the supposed bashfulness of the Ladies, especially their autonomy in deciding which events carried their charitable work: the report closed by stating "We leave it to you honorable men to act as any wise man would act."

The 'honorable' Ladies Aid Society also acted wisely, refusing to engage with the slander. They simply noted that also this report did not find wrongdoing in their minutes. As a matter of fact, the club grew even further in the wake of the crisis.[64] In Shakir's brief historical account of

[64] One important factor in their consolidation was the clearing of the mortgage for their clubhouse to gain financial independence as soon as possible. They formed a committee specifically for this purpose in 1934 (#483) and in 1945 they were finally able to celebrate the burning of the mortgage with a concert (Shakir, Hannah, "Donations"). As landladies of their club house at 44 West Newton street, the SLAS also faced new challenges and possibilities in defining what respectability meant to them. Now it was the club who set the rules for others, wielding new powers by deciding who could rent their rooms and for what purposes (#559). They would only rent out their premises to other clubs (not individuals) that wanted to host "respectable haflis and affairs, not for good-time sahras, drinking, etc" (#304). For example, when the

this incident, she notes that ultimately the Ladies "outworked and outlasted all the men's clubs in the community" (138). I further read the men's aggressiveness in their attack on the Ladies as a sign for how their self-organization reached the limits of what some men in the community would tolerate within the bounds of 'acceptable' women's work. As the Ladies, at this point, were too established and successful to be controlled directly, the report attempted to harm the Ladies' respectability by questioning, even withdrawing, male recognition of their charity work. To do so, the men did not attack their aid work as such, but their supposedly excessive spending on 'entertainment.'

The club motto "Good Works, Good Times" encapsulates how inextricably linked the Syrian Ladies' social well-being and entertainment were with their charitable work, and a great deal of their success and public agency rested on their unapologetic assertion of women's right to "good times." Sahras (house parties) and haflis (public dinners) were an integral part of the SLAS' club functions. Hannah Shakir's memories of club outings highlight that such "good times" did not impact the club's budget, but were fundamental to their internal community building: "And we'd go on outings. Just for a good time, not to raise money. We'd split the cost of a bus and go different places: to Hudson, where there was a lake, and to Marlboro. Every year we'd go a different place" ("Interview" 1). Such mobility outside the home changed the conditions of possibility for what Syrian American women could do with their spare time. Travelling in groups still paid respect to traditional notions of propriety, but the Ladies effectively changed the terms of what was acceptable within the limits of respectability—also with regard to social club events.

The weekly parties at various homes of club members established semi-public, social spheres for entertainment. For example, Mary Shalhoub Saad's parties were so popular that people

Syrian American Club wanted to rent a room to play cards, the Ladies refused for fear of their reputation (#356).

come from all over Boston to their suburban home, and "the people around there, they thought we were bootleggers. (…) Because people were coming up to visit us, you know" (4). The specter of illegal alcohol consumption during Prohibition could have been detrimental, but as Syrian Ladies' events were strictly for charity, Saad does not appear seriously concerned for her reputation. Charity through social events facilitated rule bending in other ways too. These weekly parties also included male guests (8) and some of Saad's memories about women's roles at these lively parties: "she used to get up and imitate her brothers, how they dance. She could dance like men do. E—So they' weren't all quiet and shy… M—oh, no. Shy, nothing! They went for the good times. (…) No, they didn't act any different if there men. They were just as lively and everything if there were men around. They'd make them do things" (10). Najeebi Naddaff further emphasized women's cultural agency, how they made their own jokes and entertainment: "It started, we used to make good, good in the Club" (13). These examples go to show that under the cover of charitable womanhood Syrian Ladies used their position as club women to forge new social spaces and practices that could change norms of 'modern' Syrian American womanhood.

In organizing themselves, Syrian immigrant women had to assert themselves as 'modern' from the very start. Modesty would have been entirely unpractical for clubwomen. At one of the first meetings, Khalil Gibran visited the Ladies and the freshly minted president of the society, Saada Abdelnour, was too shy to address and thank him (#4). Initially the Ladies' shyness is a recurring theme, but already in February 1918 one of the founding members, Rose Ferris, not only praised the charitable goals of the club, but also boldly states that "if a woman is not embarrassed (shy), and uncovers her face, works hard for charity—she will succeed. Much applause—pleased with her" (#7). This ambivalent approach to public agency, grounded in traditional values of charity to justify women's outreach and success in the public sphere, would come to characterize

the Syrian Ladies' vision of proper womanhood, and links the Ladies to the club movement at large. Most women's clubs had a mandate to educate their members and communities. This quest for self-improvement is also evident in the official founding document of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society. The Society's registration as a "cooperation" with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on September 14th, 1920, defines the Ladies' goals in terms of charity: "for the purpose of rendering charitable assistance to the needy Syrians in Boston and suburbs and other places if possible." Education too is stressed: "to educate its members and prepare them for the beneficiary work necessary to the Syrian colony" (Commonwealth). To execute this "beneficiary work" the Syrian Ladies had to develop a charitable, but self-confident kind of womanhood.

Finally, the Syrian Ladies' emerged out of, and maintained ties to, both Syrian religious and American civil society institutions. Emphasis on religious heritage was a constitutive element for many women's clubs across the nation, facilitating both friendships and institutional support (Gere 4-5). In contrast to church clubs, self-organization was the defining element of women's clubs. Women's charitable work in church clubs, run usually under male leadership, do not fall under the same category, even if these different kinds of organizations could cooperate closely. Initially, the Syrian Ladies operated on the premises of the Saint George's Orthodox Church. Nazirah Abdallah recalls those early days in St. George Church under priest Georg Maloof, when "The first St. George's was just a room in a house, not a church" (3). She continues: "The place used to be full, mostly of American people. They thought he was especially holy because he was from the Holy Land. (By Americans, she probably means Irish and Italian, Irish anyway)" (4). In 1921, the SLAS moved to a flat on top of the apartment of Khalil Gibran's sister Mariana, who thus was also a frequent visitor at club functions. The Ladies then fully consolidated their operations when they purchased their own clubhouse ("Good" 136). Helen Ashook Sabbagh

describes how their active social club life had to fit in the general social schedule of the community. The SLAS events ran alongside church events, and mutual attendance was expected (4), but the Syrian Ladies clearly established themselves as a women's club in their own right.

The proximity to Orthodox church facilities and Catholic immigrants indicates that the Ladies' efforts at self-fashioning as an organization emerge out of the specific US racialization of Syrianness—as not-quite-white immigrants and via references to Holy Land Orientalism. Piety and religious devotion linked the Syrian Ladies to idealized visions of Christian Syrian womanhood. For example, all new members had to swear an oath, by their honor and religion, "which I treasure," to obey the by-laws (#135). When visitors from their male counterpart, the Syrian American Club, attended meetings, they would cite bible verses "praising charity of the good woman" (#10). Similarly, foreign religious dignitaries, including bishops and patriarchs from the old country, visited Boston and often paid their respects to the Ladies. Their support explicitly condones the women's work. The minutes note that a visiting patriarch stated that "charity is the best jewel a woman can wear" (# 85). The womanly connotation of charity as service-oriented work, compatible with domestic duties to home and family, in the service of the community and nation, mitigated the threat of independence and institutional power that the Ladies also very quickly came to represent. As a women's club the Ladies then incorporated references to piety and Holy Land pageantry, but they pushed the boundaries of Syrian American club womanhood beyond these limits.

Charity did not only carry religious connotations. As a female virtue, it cut across Syrian and American national ideals of respectable and modern womanhood; as a guiding principle, it shaped all kinds of women's movements, from girl scouts to suffragettes.[65] Within the Shakir

[65] Throughout their club history, the Ladies encountered a plethora of different organizations. One episode of an encounter between a girl scout representative and the Syrian Ladies reflects how ideals of

archive, there are only a few references to the Syrian Ladies' relationship to suffragette activism, and those references emerge out of their interaction with settlement houses. Next to the church, the Denison House offered both structural and ideological support for future Syrian American women's self-organizing in Boston. Settlement houses were often run by university-affiliated clubwomen and aimed to help poor women immigrants. The concept emerged in Chicago, where Jane Addams founded the Hull House in 1889. Locally, the Hull House provided a wide range of social and educational services, but it also inspired a national movement and settlement houses across the country participated in progressive-era reform movements—with a particular emphasis on suffrage and women's rights (Johnson "Hull House"). Emily Greene Balch, a professor at Wellesley College, founded the Denison House (DH) in Boston in 1892, inspired by the Hull House model. Prominent local women volunteered at the DH, including Amelia Earhart during the mid-1920s. They offered a comprehensive range of classes (English, nursing, weaving, sports and leisure activities) to help women improve themselves, as well as social support for struggling families and workrooms where women could sew and earn a bit of money. As immigrant women, Syrian newcomers were actively recruited to participate in the activities of the Denison House, next to Italian and Greek immigrants. The Denison House liked to host exhibitions celebrating the immigrants' cultural heritage, and also organized theater performances for entertainment/education (Schlesinger Library). The Syrian Ladies would adapt many of these traits into their own club womanhood to come.

respectable/Christian womanhood could function as a (perceived) node. The American woman visited them to recruit Syrian girls for the girl scouts "as they would "become obedient, respectful, honest, clean, and other good things" (#91). The Ladies, however, note this meeting in their minutes in a very reserved tone and never return to the issue. It appears they did not want to associate themselves with girl scouts too closely, despite potential Christian/charitable affinities.

Instances of Syrian women's involvement in political action for suffrage, through the local community organizers at the Denison House, largely precede the foundation of the SLAS in 1917. Shakir found that the Denison House reports of 1915 and 1916 mention that Syrian women wanted to engage in autonomous employment outside the house, and that the local staff appeared to encourage all immigrant women to participate in parades in support of suffrage (*Bint* 60). These early feminist relationships between the Denison House and Syrian women caused controversy. Shakir further notes that the Denison House's educational outreach program was met with resistance by the community, but the attraction of their festivals and classes for the local women proved too great ("Notes" 6). I argue that the Syrian Ladies, once they began to self-organize autonomously, used their adaptive agency through the subject position of club womanhood to embrace and integrate both religious and feminist principles of charitable womanhood. Structurally, the SLAS maintained close ties to both organizations—the Denison House and St. George's—from day one. The Ladies met in St. George's, but they ran their events and other charitable functions in Denison House—especially events geared at the public at large. Throughout their club history they would regularly meet with Syrian and Syrian American church officials, but they continued to collaborate with the DH well into the 1930s too. The Ladies held annual suppers at Denison House until the purchase of their own clubhouse, and even after their consolidation they maintained intimate ties with the Denison staff—sending donations and collaborating on events (e.g. #116, #261).

This structural balancing act also negotiated the racial connotations embedded in the already circulating notions of modern womanhood and community expectations of proper Syrian American womanhood. It was a co-incidence that Amelia Earhart worked at the Denison House between 1926-29, when the Syrian Ladies were already organizing themselves, but nevertheless

significant. Earhart was the quintessential New Woman of her time and the Denison House proudly advertised her presence (Shakir, "Notes" 6). Moreover, as shown in chapter two, Earhart symbolized all that went wrong with US modern womanhood for Syrian American male leaders like Paul Deab: her radical female independence hung as a threatening specter over the Syrian American marriage debates in 1927-28. The Syrian Ladies never openly advocated for women's rights; rather, they emphasized piety. However, their actions as clubwomen, especially when having a good time, implemented strands of modern womanhood in their practices. Even though there are no comments in the SLAS minutes on the marriage debates in *The Syrian World* as such, their enthusiasm for Earhart can be read as an implicit political statement. The timing may, or may not, have been a coincidence with regards to the communities' marriage debates, but the Syrian Ladies were eager to associate themselves with Earhart. In October 1928, they decided to send two free tickets to Earhart for their annual supper at the Denison House (#261). The minutes do not mention if Earhart attended, and likely she did not. However, the fact that the Ladies sought to present her as a guest of honor at a *Syrian American* social function manifests their interest in meeting a prominent New Woman.

The relationships between the Denison ladies and the Syrian ladies as an immigrant women's club, however, were not fully equal partnerships, especially in the early days during World War I.[66] The DH's outreach to uplift poor immigrant women remained entangled with racial

[66] One entry in the SLAS minutes raises doubts about the motivations of the Denison House staff: "know about DH. We told her that people says they make money on our people. (all this is very confusing, too)" (#16). The minutes do not reiterate such doubts, but, as in the above-mentioned example about the dinners the Syrian Ladies hosted at the Denison House "in Eastern clothes" (Shakir, Hannah, "Interview" 2), the Ladies participated in a kind of self-marketing that used auto-orientalist, embodied performances geared at American patrons. I cannot tell from the available archival material if the Denison House staff encouraged the Ladies to capitalize on the marketability of their Syrianness via consumerist, exotic Orientalisms, but it is possible that they shaped the Ladies' decisions on how to present themselves publicly.

associations and, in 1917, war-time nationalism. For example, the Denison House wanted to ensure that the Syrian Ladies participated in efforts to shore up the patriotic allegiance of immigrant groups, in line with the larger national anxieties about the allegiances of European, particularly German, immigrants. In a telling passage, Hannah Shakir mentions that "we used to march in parades. Once, during the War, we made a float with pretty girls sitting on it. And when they were selling Liberty Bonds in the Public Gardens, Rose Malouf (she was really something) went up on the platform—all nationalities did this—and she cried out, "Come on, buy a bond! Buy a bond!" By that time, we were beginning to feel more American" ("Mother II" 6). The impetus for club activities as a means of Americanization appears only that explicitly during World War I, but expectations to represent Syrian Americanness in Boston continued to shape the Ladies' public reception.

Performing Literacy—The SLAS as a Cultural Institution

Literacy, next to charity, was a foundational characteristic of club womanhood. For many women their club meetings were spaces to develop their education and self-improvement via intimate relations to reading and writing. Claiming literacy by default contested women's supposed intellectual inferiority, also a reason for exclusion from suffrage. Further, the affective attachment to literary practices in this collective setting had socially transformative power: it established new forms of community, effectively breaking down the private/public dichotomy, and the women engaged with national discourses by discussing literature or by writing club publications and texts that also circulated in mainstream newspapers (Gere 9-14). Literacy thus functioned as an entry requirement into the national imagined community for clubwomen and, as such, it relates directly to the nation's racial hierarchies as well: literacy for white Protestant women was a question of

individual merit. Jewish and working-class women's clubs used literacy as a strategy of emplacement, to ward off the stigma of being un-American, while African American women had been denied literacy during slavery and had to continually assert literacy as 'proof' of their fitness for civilization and citizenship (22).[67]

African American women's clubs at the turn of the twentieth century still had to challenge their exclusion from the benefits of US citizenship. Clubwomen like Fannie Barrier Williams were acutely aware that they had to promote a more positive public image for African American women to secure their rights and safety. The Boston New Era Club thus began publishing *Women's Era* in 1894, the first African American newspaper published by women, which significantly contributed to the national visibility of literate black club womanhood (Smith and Watson, *Before* 285). In 1917, the year the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston was founded, the racial politics of the literacy requirement were explicitly expanded and applied to immigrants as well. To curb mass immigration, President Wilson's Immigration bill of 1917 (Public Act No. 301) adopted literacy as an explicit entry requirement for male aliens—women and the very young or elderly were exempt. Gere relates literacy as a means of immigration restriction directly to the cultural work of women's clubs at large (20). Already before the act itself, women's literacy had been a contested issue between various ideals of national womanhood, and now the stakes for immigrant women's legal and cultural inclusion were even higher.

The Syrian Ladies were in the privileged position of starting their club work as citizens after the racial prerequisite court cases defined Syrians as Caucasians in 1915. Literacy, at first glance, did not appear to hold the same relevance for them as for other immigrant or African

[67] African American slave narratives were among the first nationally circulated documents that used black author's literary merits to claim/prove their humanity (even if such narratives still required the endorsement of white editors) (Gates).

American women's clubs. As a primarily charitable organization, the Syrian Ladies did not discuss literary works or produce club newspapers. Public perceptions may have regarded the Syrian Ladies as an immigrant organization, more than a 'cultural' women's club. However, more broadly defined, literacy also includes the performative acts of self-organization that carry club life itself: minute taking, annual programs, or the collective production of stage plays for charity purposes (Gere 15). All of these activities were central to the Ladies' club life and their cultural emplacement as an *American* women's club, despite their focus on Syrian communities in the old and new country. In short, even if the Ladies did not engage in typical reading circles, there were many different ways in which they performed literacy: embodied performances as actresses in local stage productions, club minutes detailing their concerns and decisions, as well as correspondence and relationships to the Syrian American press. Taken together, all these practices established the SLAS as a cultural institution in the Syrian American Boston community. Moreover, as a cultural institution under female leadership, the Ladies acquired a distinct platform for adaptive agency. They maintained and linked local and transnational cultural networks, deciding not just where and to whom to deliver aid, but also which stage plays to adapt, which movies to screen and how to promote them to their potential audiences.

To begin with, the most immediate practice of literacy, which enabled the Ladies' trans/national operations, were different modes of correspondence and letter writing. They received written aid requests from the city, local and national institutions, as well as from the old country; moreover, they actively reached out in cases of personal or national tragedies, sending sympathy cards to local Syrian and American families as well as overseas (#489). Their aid work also required promotion and media outreach. The Syrian Ladies may not have published newsletters or magazines themselves, but they maintained close contact to the Syrian and

American press from the start. The first minutes of the club reflect the sense of exhilaration and empowerment when the "New York papers" advertise their foundation: "First time this has happened, women's names in NY papers" (#7). The minutes further emphasize that, at first, it was the men's idea to contact the New York press (#1). Male honorary members were often present, and the Ladies' minutes are careful to note their involvement in major decisions. Shakir interprets this as a strategic measure to gain more legitimacy as a woman's club. However, the sense of pride and increasing self-confidence in their public role quickly changed these dynamics. It became a standard procedure for the women to reach out to the papers: both to the Syrian press in Boston and New York, and to the American press if the case was of 'general' interest. For example, in response to a local tragedy in which a family had died in a fire, the Ladies note that they "will try and get publicity for DH supper in American papers (ad? article?) [sic] mentioning only names of officers. Will print and distribute flyers, too, saying where proceeds will go" (#240).

SLAS members also acted as amateurs in plays for local patrons. Charity work intersected here with performances of literacy and the need for promotion in the Syrian American press. The relationships between the Ladies and the press deepened over time, establishing precedent for women's public outreach and even creating female journalistic networks. For example, Shakir's archive documents the collaboration and exchange between Julia, a member of the Syrian Ladies Junior chapter, and the journalist Margaret Alexander, who wrote for the New York based newspaper *The Syrian Voice* in the 1930s. Julia, likely the daughter of SLAS founding member Helen Sabbagh, reached out to Alexander on December 6th, 1934, to invite her to the Annual Luncheon in the Club House on 44 West Newton Street. Julia maintained her contact with Margaret, even chiding her for failing to appear at their events in another letter on November 25th, 1935: "Hello Margaret: Yes, this lady's in again. This time it's our Annual Dance. The 'World'

doesn't seem to come out as often as it did, so we thought we'd ask you a long time before the dance to mention it in your column" (Sabbagh, "November"). Alexander dutifully complied. In her column "Peeps at Bostonians by Margret Alexander" in *The Syrian Voice* she recounts how much she enjoyed the first musical of the season produced by the Ladies after her long "absence from the Syrian scene" (Alexander "Peeps"). Their collaboration continued over several years; at times Alexander directly solicited Julia's input for a column: "Next week, *without any more procrastination*, I MUST write a column**** HELLP!!! [sic]—Please" (Alexander, undated). Julia replies on May 20th, 1936: "Yes ma'am! (…) But you'll have to excuse, me, Margaret. I mean for not writing sooner and on my own initiative. (…) Regardless of that I'm willing to lend an ear,--or an eye,—or even some news, (…)" (Sabbagh, "May").

Alexander's report about the Boston Ladies' as cultural agents in the Syrian scene also sheds some light on the reception of their plays and entertainment arrangements. The evening was well received, drawing a large crowd, and featured various artists and kinds of performances. Alexander's description of the night outlines the intricate levels of production at this play. Artists included local performers as well as visitors from New York, and the individual acts included singing, dancing and comedy. Alexander's descriptions document how elaborate the Ladies' stage productions had become by the 1930s, testifying also to the various levels of adaptive agency necessary to produce such theatrical events. First, the selection of plays required that the Ladies would have been familiar with and discussed literary sources they wanted to adapt to the stage, even if the minutes themselves do not record such discussions. Second, the Ladies' acting adapted literary themes or tropes in their embodied presence on stages. Third, as cultural producers, the Ladies brought in artists from outside the community. And fourth, they shaped significantly which kinds of plays, musicals and later movies the Boston Syrian American community consumed.

The Syrian Ladies' cultural adaptive agency had a double function: as producers and actresses, they literally engaged in adapting and staging theater plays for local audiences, but their choices can also be read as implicit political and/or representative statements about Syrian American community formation. To begin with, the changes in which kinds of plays the Ladies produced over time reflects their increasing influence on local community formation and self-confidence in adapting Arab culture as part and parcel of Syrian American ethnic identity. Initially their own plays and performances were still an intimate affair. The first productions included one act plays as entertainment at weddings of club members (#127), or Ladies would perform short plays and poems at haflis, the dinners they organized for the community. Most of the early plays were in Arabic and/or of Middle Eastern origin, and addressed Arabic speaking Syrian Americans. In 1924, the Ladies began staging plays in public venues (#150), which were presented in English and thus open to general audiences as well. Such public productions were also part of the Ladies' promotion of their club work, establishing their reputation as an organization in Boston. The minutes of December 1925 state for the first time a specific name of one of their plays: "The Missing Girl" (#203). While I do not know the exact content of this play, the name may very well have pointed to, or at least resonated with, one of the first major successes of the club's work—an episode the Ladies were already well known for locally.

In May 1920, just after the official foundation of the club, the Ladies solved a spectacular case in the community that helped establish their reputation. A mother, from a Boston suburb, deposited her stepdaughter in the city to get rid of her. The Ladies took care of the lost girl, reunited her with her father, and took the stepmother to court. They then decided to "write Newspapers in N.Y. re what happened" (#56) and the Ladies received much praise, including thank you notes from the Boston state house; moreover, the story ran in the biggest community newspaper, *Al Hoda*

(#57). As a foundational narrative, this story helped the Syrian Ladies to present themselves as caring mothers and respectable Syrian women 'despite' their public work, and one can speculate if the play "The Missing Girl" was meant to further strengthen this image. [68] In either case, it was evident that the play, as a new genre of their charity work, raised significantly more money than the average dinner—about $800. Stage productions for general audiences thus became a fixed part of the Ladies' cultural work.

Even though in most cases I have no access to the exact contents of the plays, sometimes the date and title allow for speculations about the political motivations of the Ladies' adaptive choices. For example, in 1929 the Ladies decide to perform the play "The Secret Marriage" (# 279), just after marriage practices had become so hotly debated within the community. Based on the title it is likely that the plot revolves around a secret love marriage, rather than an arrangement. Further, the Ladies appear invested in widely advertising this play, going door to door to sell the tickets. Their production then also received favorable reviews in the New York papers (#279). Such archival traces at least allow a glimpse into the possible politics embedded in the Ladies' position within the community, and how adaptations of certain themes in plays offered them a platform to voice an opinion in a 'respectable,' indirect way. That is, their adaptive agency as Syrian Ladies functions here not as outright resistance, but it manages divergent opinions in ways that may still change the terms of debate. Offering a play, rather than a political speech or pamphlet, as a vision for love-based marriage would have been an effective way for the Ladies to invite discussions among their audiences without appearing 'too political' as a women's club.

[68] Although speculative, it would not have been unprecedented for women's clubs to historicize themselves (at least indirectly) by alluding to foundational figures or episodes for a given community. For example, Mary Church Terrell wrote a pageant about Phillis Wheatley for the NACW. Gere notes that "such performances demonstrate how clubwomen deployed the physicality of their literacy to historicize themselves and their organizations" (36).

Finally, in the 1930s, the Ladies entered a new phase by expanding the repertoire of their cultural work beyond stage plays: they began sponsoring movie screenings of Arabic films in Boston. This is, again, remarkable as their choice of Arabic, rather than US based, movies directly contradicts assimilation narratives *and* shows that the Ladies also used Middle Eastern cultural productions as sources for implied political commentary on the marriage debates through their cultural adaptive agency. Their international reputation and success as cultural producers grew to the point that distributors of Middle Eastern films who often held screenings in New York (#435), or actors who sought to promote their own films, began contacting the Ladies (#469). By this time the Ladies had become professionals. They outright refused unfavorable requests from companies that sought to take advantage of them, insisting, for example, on an even 50/50 split for sponsoring the movies *Danair* and *Aadiet*. They clearly asserted that it was they who would "spell out conditions" (#644) and that the distributors had to pay the censorship fees. While most request were sent to them, in terms of adaptive agency it is most significant that—sometimes—the Ladies themselves would ask for a local screening of movies running in New York: for example, the Egyptian movies *White Rose* (#529) and *Tears of Love* (#643).

Politically, the screenings of these two particular movies would have been a clear statement in favor of 'modern' marriage practices, since the earliest films of the budding Egyptian movie industry after 1930 explicitly critiqued practices of arranged marriage, often adapting the themes of doomed love popularized by Muhammad Husain Hiakal's best-selling novel *Zeinab* (1913). The musical film *The White Rose* (1934) was one of the first Egyptian sound movies. The film centers on the protagonist's unrequited love for a rich girl, played by the famous singer Mohamed Abdel Wahab. The rose symbolized the purity of his love and similar themes appear in the movie *Tears of Allah* (1936). Both movies were produced by the Egyptian actor and director

Karim Mohamad, in collaboration with Yussuf Wahbi's film studio, and widely distributed across the Arab world (Ginsberg and Lippart 224)—and, as the SLAS minutes reveal, across the Arab diaspora. I further posit that their strong endorsement of these two movies indicates that the Ladies turned here to Egyptian movies, rather than US cultural productions, to indirectly comment upon arranged marriage. The minutes do not record the content of their debates, but the Ladies dedicated one meeting to discussing *Tears of Love*. There is no mention of any literary discussions of novels or plays otherwise, so the Ladies' interest in this movie stands out. They appear to have been so impressed by this movie (and the romantic hero) that in February 1938 they planned an extravagant publicity campaign for their Boston screening, using a "(sound) truck playing records of Abdel Wahan, going through streets outside Boston" (#644) with English announcements. Despite the speculative nature of these points about the political implications of the screenings, the fact that the Ladies presented both American and Arab cultural productions documents that they used their access to trans/national cultural networks to influence the formation of a Syrian American ethnic identity. Furthermore, they did so not as a form of simple assimilation, but as a selective and deliberate merging of 'Eastern' and 'Western' cultural ideals.

In doing so, the Ladies' stage productions, as Syrian American women, also engaged with stereotypical US racial imaginaries. Just as in their charity work, the Syrian Ladies were often commissioned to specifically perform Holy Land pageantry. American clubs, such as the Cosmopolitan Club of Boston, asked the Ladies to perform a Christmas Tableau (#5). Another request in 1927 "asked [the Ladies] to participate in program of an American club. We will sell sweets and put on a nativity tableau" (#241). The Ladies would receive such requests because they were *Syrian,* and readily accepted these invitations. Performances of 'traditional' Holy Land auto-Orientalisms conflicted with neither their respectability as pious women, nor with community

expectations that cherished the cultural proximity to American whiteness symbolized by this origin narrative.[69] However, the Ladies did not just engage in pious productions—performing was central to their social development as clubwomen and their sense of cultural agency. In this light, it is intriguing to see that the archive contains one set photograph that documents the Ladies' choice to put on an orientalist fun play where they themselves, as actresses, represent embodied harem stereotypes.

Figure 18. *Fun Play*, undated. Syrian Ladies Aid Society, Evelyn Shakir Collection (AANM)

[69] This was though unlikely to dissolve Syrian American racial ambivalence. For their general audiences a focus on 'oriental' themes would have also blurred the line toward orientalist, and thus racialized, frames. Performances of Syrian Christian identity supported proximity to whiteness, but the 'Arab' context of Holy Land pageantry would also raise the racialized stigma of Arab Muslimness.

The photograph of the actresses at the fun play, put on for another American club, depicts Syrian Ladies dressed as sheiks and harem women (fig. 18). Their fashioning of the characters in this play adapts orientalist-racial stock elements (including perhaps unintended resonances with stereotypes of oriental queerness in their cross dressing for male parts).[70] The photograph is undated, but the play would have run in the late 1920s, certainly after the enormous popular success of T*he Sheik* movie in 1921. The Ladies' choice to embody sheik and harem characters may have primarily utilized this popularity to maximize their profits for charity by catering to orientalist audience expectations, but it is remarkable that as a Syrian American women's club they could afford to embody and represent harem ladies *on stages* in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Such orientalist, visual references would have been anathema in early Syrian American family photography, but, rather than fearing for their reputation or shying away from bringing 'Syrianness' into proximity to stereotypical Muslim Arab Otherness, the Ladies here self-confidently adapt American stereotypes about imagined Arab womanhood.

Giddings notes that the success of African American women's clubs, and the ways in which black clubwomen shattered stereotypes, brought greater freedom of expression to black women artists at large. *The Creole Show* began breaking with minstrelsy traditions and black women dancers and singers, like Sissiretta Jones, started to present themselves as glamorous stars, while other performers, most notably Josephine Baker, took the liberty to exoticize herself (132-3). I do not intend to compare here the Syrian Ladies' local stage productions to the national and international fame of black women vaudeville stars, or the stakes of re-asserting black sexuality from jezebel stereotypes. However, it appears that the respective national/local prominence of their

[70] The mere fact of women acting on stage pushed the boundaries of respectability at the time: "The girls used to take the men's parts. We were too embarrassed in those days to act with men. We were all amateurs. Later we acted men and women together" (Shakir, Hannah, "Interview" 1). As so often the Ladies used traditional decorum, acting in women only crews, to break new ground at the same time.

women's clubs could afford African and Syrian American women greater flexibility in their self-fashioning. National stardom was certainly out of reach for Syrian American clubwomen in Boston. Locally, though, their position as Syrian Ladies, solidified by their proximity to Christian whiteness and successful assertion of respectability, allowed them to adapt racially charged auto-orientalist harem tropes without major repercussions.

Lastly, this flexibility enabled the Syrian Ladies also to toy with US American boundaries of respectable womanhood beyond harem themes. The Ladies' stage adaptation of an Arabic version of *Madame X* was an especially daring choice for a respectable, Syrian Ladies immigrant women's club and left lasting memories with Hannah Shakir. *Madame X* was a French play written by Alexandre Bisson in 1908. In France it remained rather obscure, but its American movie adaptations in 1920, 1929, 1937 and 1966 became hugely popular—especially the very explicit 1929 pre-code version with Ruth Chatterton. Madame X was a fallen woman, cast out by her husband after an affair, and only able to see her son grow up from afar—a punishment for her affair. The play revolves around her attempts to save her respectable son from her bad reputation and unorthodox life choices. The two are reunited in the end, but the play coined the genre of maternal melodrama in Hollywood, and was centered on Madame X's suffering. Most movies of the golden age in the 1920s were success stories, and *Anna Ascends* would be a typical example of the immigrant kind of such a success story (Viviani 170-1). *Madame X*'s tale of failure and descent was unusual for Hollywood, and even more so among the cultural productions presented by the Syrian Ladies. Hannah Shakir recalls: "We brought a woman in from Worcester to play Madame X. You had to be smart to do that role. You had to know how to smoke and drink and act drunk" ("Mother II" 5). But even if the protagonist was not played by a member of the Ladies themselves, indicating that this role was so controversial that they after all had to bring in a woman

from elsewhere to take on the part, they produced this play for their local audiences. Shakir's comments reflect that personal respectability remained a concern for women who would act on stage, but her memories also reveal that the Ladies enjoyed a high degree of cultural agency that allowed them to interact with and comment upon developments in both Syrian and national norms of womanhood.

The Ladies' Trans/National Politics in the Interwar Years

In the final section of this chapter, I offer a brief historical overview of the local and international political connections the Syrian Ladies built during the interwar years through their aid work. On a very fundamental level, the logistics of their charitable work required transnational networks and contacts. In 1918, the Ladies began collecting money by knitting for soldiers, selling flowers, and organizing haflis. By February 1919, they were ready to send their first aid overseas, which posed logistical challenges. They relied on churches, contacts to three patriarchs of the Orthodox, Catholic and Maronite communities, as well as on local businessmen to send money (#33). However, success was not immediate. Their first attempts at sending physical goods, a trunk with clothes and sewing material, failed—the ship sank during the passage. They discussed the logistics of sending money via Beirut and Cairo instead (#30), but with the end of the war, the focus quickly shifted to asserting their position in the local community.

From the start the Ladies collaborated with other institutions and clubs, Syrian American as well as American. Such collaborations could be helpful: for example, in 1918 another club asked them for help in producing the play "Syrian Martyrs" in exchange for 25% of the income. This collaboration was likely another initial inspiration for how to raise money via stage productions. However, there was also concern about competition and receiving their fair share of recognition

for their work—especially as women. When an American lady asked them to give away flowers for donations, the Ladies were suspicious. They decided to investigate who sent her first, as they had heard rumors that the Syrian American Club was "taking credit for everything happening" (#22) in the Syrian community. The minutes thus document that the SLAS was not always strategically deferring to male authority: at times, the Ladies vocally resisted having their own agency eclipsed.

Their increasing success triggered personal attacks and territorial disputes over who could collect donations from whom. The members of a committee at St. John's parish, to the great distress of the Ladies, voiced public complaints and spread false rumors to deter the Ladies from collecting charity from its members (#28). The Ladies replied and asked for a meeting to clarify this misunderstanding. However, this episode could not stop their increasing reach. The Ladies themselves also actively contacted American women's clubs in 1919, seeking cooperation and offering to donate their time (# 32), and by March 1920 they noted that "membership going well. Decided to rent own clubhouse (flat) do what we want, grow" (#51).

Their charity mission was inherently transnational and their decisions about where and to whom to allocate aid were not only political, but also actively involved negotiating the multi-ethnic layers of Syrianness. For example, they included aid for Palestinians as part of their Syrian relief work. In June 1921, the Ladies received a letter from overseas, asking for help for Palestinian orphans, and they agreed to support this request because according "to bylaws can still help overseas when asked for aid" (#86). They continued sending aid to Palestine over the years (#239); however, there were also instances of discussion as to whether aid should go to 'local' Syrian Americans in Mississippi instead. Remarkably, they refused a zero-sum logic that would pit groups against each other. They rather decided to stick to their agreed transfers to Palestine and to simply

raise more money with a new sahra for Mississippi (#242). The Syrian diaspora had spread across the Americas, and many Syrians desired to return to the old country. The minutes record instances where the Ladies helped (usually older) Syrians who wanted to return home (#127) and this support for return migration extended far beyond Boston. They even helped a blind man from Mexico who wanted to go home (#192). By 1928, the Ladies had to refuse more and more requests that they deemed incompatible with their by-laws; for example, they refused to pay a $1000 bond for a would-be immigrant detained at New York harbor, having decided that this did not constitute true need (#253).

With their international reputation came also a representative function for proper Syrian *and* Syrian American womanhood. Boston city officials and local organizations requested their participation in parades, for example on 4th of July (#19) and Armistice Day (#189), or contributions to the city's exhibits on the immigrant populations of Boston (#297, #427). They also actively reached out, shaping the public image of Syrian American womanhood, by, for example, sending dried apricots to the other local clubs as a thank you for patronizing their events, or by regularly inviting the Boston mayor/representatives to their suppers (#177). When visitors came from the old country, they were called upon to represent Syrian womanhood as the lived/embodied testimony to their continued respectability in the diaspora. In all of these representative functions, the Ladies were wary of appearing overtly political. When, for example, Gibran requests their presence to welcome Syrian representatives to Boston, they agreed to be present, "just to welcome them, but not getting involved in politics" (#90). The Ladies tended to be more open to meet and support visits by religious notables, for example, the Orthodox patriarch in 1936 (#578). By contrast, they refused to participate in or support rallies for political candidates in Boston, or to rent their house for political and/or individual uses (#578).

Male representatives appear to have frequently travelled back and forth between Syrian American and old country communities, while the Ladies did not. However, the minutes testify to the existence of remote, transnational networks specifically between women's organizations, through correspondence and aid work. Women's movements have a long history in Syria and Lebanon, and were already well established by the time the Ladies were founded in Boston. The first Syrian women's movements were founded in 1880, powered also by general cultural changes in the Arab renaissance, resistance to the Ottoman empire and support through Syrian nationalism. The women hosted literary salons, founded their own magazines and women's presses, and engaged in charity work (Arenfeldt and Al-Hassan Golley 65-6). Despite significant resistance from religious and patriarchal institutions, these organizations and presses developed influential regional networks that thrived for as long as they supported nationalist causes. Women's movements thus operated between anti-colonial, politically conscious activism and a more bourgeois, upper-class intellectual outreach (114-7). Magazine publications were one avenue to reconcile these potentially conflicting tendencies within the women's movements. The first Syrian women's magazine was published in 1893 (66).

In 1923, the Ladies receive a "Letter from Julia Tumi (o.c.) editor of New Woman, magazine in Beirut, [who] hears of our club from Archmandirte Shalhoub. Very pleased that women have such a club. Sends us subscription as a gift. If need her help, will do what she can" (#131). This entry is remarkable. First, it testifies to how fast the Ladies' reputation had spread internationally, because their local club had attracted the attention of the Lebanese women's press. Second, the magazine's name "New Woman" shows how widely localized notions of New Womanhood were used all over the world, and that gendered adaptations of modernity did not just originate and circulate in the US. The Lebanese women's movement at the time was far better

organized than the Syrian Ladies and had their own media and distributions channels, which they offered in support of the fledging club in Boston. The Ladies functioned here as a marker of 'modernity' of the diaspora communities, and it pleased the old country editor to see such progress.

Soon, however, the direction of support would change. In 1926, Syrians revolted against the French mandate (Bawardi 4), and the Ladies were immediately alerted to the "emergency. Decided to help but will wait to see what whole Boston community will do—how to send help" (#203). Thanks to the already existing networks and collaborations between the Ladies and Syrian women's organizations, in January 1926 they were able to send $1000 to the old country, divided between five organizations: the women's charitable organizations in Beirut, Damascus, and Zahle, the county of Marjayoon, and a local man in Bekka valley (#205). The minutes also list the local committees and contact persons that would distribute the aid accordingly, which included also "two women, Julia Damasheeyee (publisher of mag.) and Salma Saegh / asked them to give money to appropriate aid committee, indicating that money is for everyone regardless of religion" (#206). In all these years, women's organizing in Syria and Lebanon appeared to have been of marginal interest to Boston Syrian Americans. However, the Ladies themselves asked a visiting, male speaker to put this issue on the agenda at the annual hafli of 1932, so that he would "speak of women's activities in o.c." (#437).[71] The Ladies thus showed continued interest in their old country counter parts, and they responded to crises and disasters overseas throughout the 1930s (e.g. #499, #532). Aid thus established a close relationship to the political struggles in Syria until World War II engulfed both the old and new country in a new dimension of need.

[71] According to the available material in the Evelyn Shakir Collection, no member of the Syrian Ladies Aid attended any of the women's congresses overseas, such as the First Eastern Women's Congress in Damascus in 1930, the second congress 1932 in Tehran or the first pan-Arab women's conference in Cairo in 1944 that would lead to the formation of the Arab Women's Union in 1945 (Arenfeldt and Al-Hassan Golley 67).

World War II refocused the Ladies' aid work on war relief. They worked with veteran organizations, sewed bibs for paraplegics and knit blankets for soldiers (Vosk 8). However, political allegiances had become more complicated. After Britain invaded Syria in 1941, due to its military links to Vichy France, Syrian Americans could not openly advocate for their homelands without opposing Britain, a key American ally. Bawardi argues that the war thus encouraged many Syrians to add the label 'Lebanese' to their self-designations as it was a safer, less politically charged name than 'Syrian' at the time (22). The Ladies discussed if they should add "Lebanese" to their name in 1949 (# 1002), but decided against it.

During the war, the Ladies focused on proving their undivided allegiances to the US through their actions. In January 1942 they sent a representative, Lulu Mur, to be part of the "Committee of Syrian Americans to help with the War Effort" (#789)—a committee that united fourteen clubs from the region. This decision triggered some discussion as to whether such political efforts were compatible with their by-laws, and the Ladies only ever went as far as they saw fit. They unequivocally supported the Palestinian cause and they let the Arab American Committee use their hall for a meeting on Palestine in 1944 (#854). They still maintained that they could not engage in politics, but decided to provide the hall for free, "thanked club for its feeling for o.c., and applauded it" (#855). In 1944 they took a similar decision in support of the returning soldiers, offering their hall for free to anyone who wished to organize haflis for veterans (#866).

Generally, most of their wartime charity work focused on supporting the Red Cross. In response to a personal call for participation in a door-to-door donation drive in 1945 by the Read Cross, most members of the Syrian Ladies volunteered their time. They also visited wounded Syrian and Lebanese American soldiers in hospitals, bringing them Syrian food (#881), and contemplated supporting the victory book campaign to edify troop morale via book donations

(#883, #883). The club renamed itself as the "Lebanese-Syrian Ladies' Aid Society" in 1962, accounting for the ethnic self-assertion of Lebanese Americans during and after the war, but activities and membership began to dwindle in the 1960s (Shakir, "Good" 142). Veteran members began focusing on elderly care and other community issues, and the society continued their work as far as possible with fewer numbers. In 1967, the Ladies celebrated their fiftieth anniversary by honoring the thirteen charter members. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, further research is warranted on how the society responded to the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s and the Syrian civil war today.

In this chapter, I have shown that the SLAS, at its peak during the interwar years, was a significant force in the Boston community. The subject position as clubwomen allowed the Syrian Ladies to adapt their outreach work to different audiences and contexts, negotiating Syrian American racial ambivalence in the US, while also establishing transnational political networks. Perhaps most importantly, they adapted norms of respectability, but also changed their repertoire and the terms of idealized Syrian American womanhood in the process. As Syrian Ladies, they refused to just represent one side of tradition/modernity binaries, and they began to actively incorporate references to Arab and American cultural productions into Boston Syrian American ethnic identity formation. The next chapter on Rosemary Hakim, Miss Lebanon American 1955, expands upon the transition from Syrian to specifically Lebanese ethnic community formation, as well as the new possibilities for self-fashioning changes in beauty culture and post-war US political approaches to the Arab world afforded to a Lebanese American woman like Hakim.

Chapter 4 – The Beauty Queen

From Beirut with Love: Miss Lebanon-America, US Orientalism and Cold War Diplomacy

Rosemary Hakim was a young, second-generation Lebanese American woman, working as a secretary for a flower seed company in Detroit in the early 1950s. Her life changed drastically, though, when she participated in and subsequently won the first "Miss Lebanon-American" beauty pageant, organized by the Lebanese League of Progress and Al-Hoda Publications in the fall of 1954. Her victory at the pageant made her an official representative of the Lebanese American community. The vantage point of a beauty queen offered her distinct possibilities to use adaptive agency in public self-fashioning, and Hakim sized this moment far beyond what the organizers of the pageant had intended. A few month later, in January 1955, Hakim reached out to the Lebanese President Camille Chamoun in a private letter. She not only presented herself as a representative of the Lebanese American community, but also used this platform to ask for a personal favor—a journey to the homeland itself.

> Dear Mr. President:
>
> As Miss Lebanon-America I send you my warmest personal greetings.
>
> It is indeed an honor and life-long thrill for me to be choosen [sic] Miss Lebanon-America for 1954-55 to represent the Lebanese youth of the United States and Canada as this is the first time that such a title has been bestowed upon anyone. As President of Lebanon I am sure you can be very proud not only of this distinction but also of your young people here who are very much Lebanese in an American way. You will be pleased, too, I am sure, to know how many of us speak (with

> pride) the language of our fathers and mothers and how much we love the music and dance. My own parents are Sheckry Maroun Hakim from Beirut and Rose Baddour from Hammana and, because of this, it has been my desire since I was a little girl to visit Lebanon (Hakim, "Letter to Lebanese").

Her initiative in this letter triggered a chain of events that propelled Hakim out of Detroit into world politics. Her strategic adaptation of Lebanese nationalist tropes—love for the homeland, language and family— and the pitch that as a Lebanese American beauty queen she embodied the entire diaspora community brought about an invitation to Lebanon. In response to this letter, the Lebanese tourism ministry invited her to an all-expenses-paid tour of Lebanon in the summer of 1955, which in turn supported the Lebanese government's "homecoming year" agenda (see Braidy; Chamoun). Hakim was so popular in Beirut and in the Lebanese press that the United States Information Service (USIS) noticed her and began to include her promotional activities in the incipient Cold War US cultural diplomacy efforts in Lebanon. Upon her return from Beirut, her experience and status as Miss Lebanon America opened new career opportunities to the former working-class girl from Detroit, and she became a secretary at the UN Arab States Delegation in New York.

Hakim documents all these experiences in her unpublished memoir *Arabian Antipodes*, which blends romantic themes and quotidian concerns with international politics. Descriptions of her official duties as Miss Lebanon-America are short. The first six chapters of the memoir focus on recreating Hakim's emotions, judgments, opinions, and perceptions about her Beirut relatives, the region and its people, with special emphasis on its night life. These observations are written in a very informal, intimate manner. The final chapters and extra material outline her life as a UN

staffer in New York, merging again political issues with her private, romantic interests. The memoir has an oral, performative quality and I argue that Hakim uses adaptive agency to explain —or rather to justify and reconcile—her celebration of modern, Christian Lebanese and American womanhood with her romantic interests in Muslim Kuwaiti businessmen, Algerian revolutionaries and Saudi princes. These narrative performances develop a highly ambivalent, but decidedly transnational vision of Arab American womanhood. Despite its informality, Hakim's account offers a rich display of Arab American cultural and political history through her private and intimate observations.

Hakim attempted to publish her memoir with Brandt & Brandt in New York in 1960 ("Letter to Brandt"). Though she did not manage to convince the publisher to take it on, the manuscript was intended for American and Arab American audiences and offers an intriguing insight into her strategies of self-fashioning.[72] Her self-representation as a Lebanese American woman in the 1950s reflects a strong continuity in deploying hegemonic discourses and tropes that generations of Syrian-Lebanese American women had already used before her, including traditional US Holy Land Orientalisms and the Muslimwoman trope. However, Hakim expanded her personal adaptive range much more explicitly toward Hollywood productions, such as *The Sheik* movies and *Casablanca* (1942), and to embodied, performative scenarios of American modernity via Hollywood divas. This final chapter seeks to contextualize Hakim's adaptive agency in relation to the hegemonic political interests that attempted to use her status as Miss Lebanon-America for their own ends, including Lebanese nationalisms and US Cold War cultural diplomacy. Together with correspondence and newspaper reports in the "Rosemary Hakim Collection," stored at the

[72] Hakim's memoir likely developed out of newspaper reports she wrote about her experiences in Beirut. She published an article entitled "I've Been To Lebanon" in *The Caravan*, and this text re-appears verbatim in her memoir as well (Hakim "I've Been").

Arab American National Museum, the archive reflects that Hakim was not just a pawn of various national interests. On the contrary, Hakim actively mobilized her representative weight as Miss Lebanon-America to gain public visibility for herself and for the Lebanese American community in the US and in Lebanon; moreover, in doing so she used adaptive agency to negotiate her personal relationship to US racial imaginaries and 'white,' modern Arab womanhood.

Arabian Antipodes, and Hakim's narrative performance of Arab American womanhood in her memoir, are relevant to Arab American literary history as well. Most of the Arab American contemporaneous authors tried to avoid close association with their Arab heritage. The prominent (mainly male) writers of her time, such as William Blatty in *Which Way to Mecca Jack* (1957) and Vaunce Bourjaily in *Confession of a Youth Spent* (1961), performed an ironic gaze on their Arab cultural heritage, with one eye toward stabilizing their status as assimilated, white American citizens. Evelyn Shakir further notes in her analyses as a literary scholar that female characters in early Arab American literature up until the 1960s were almost exclusively mothers ("Pretending to Be Arab", "Mother's Milk", "Arab Mothers"). Hakim's memoir, however, stands out on both these counts. She proudly and explicitly claims her Lebanese Arab heritage as part of her American identity, and her self-fashioning as a modern and sexually desirable woman at the midpoint of the twentieth century testifies to a so-far overlooked moment in Arab American women's writing.

1950s Beauty Culture and the Miss Lebanon-America pageant

The Miss Lebanon America pageant in 1954 was a multi-staged event with different competitions along the East Coast; its final was incorporated into a Mahrajan, a Lebanese American community festival held in Providence, RI, on Labor Day. This event proceeded against all odds: on September 3rd, a hurricane had battered Rhode Island, leaving it a disaster area without electricity. Most state

sponsored events for Labor Day were canceled, but the Lebanese League of Progress went ahead with its festival. *The Providence Journal* reports on this decision with a mix of awe and incredulity at the Lebanese community's stubbornness. The newspaper briefly described how the three day festival expected up to 4,000 visitors, and featured food, concerts and dances ("R.I. Labor Day" 2). We know from newspaper clippings of the Arab American press, such as *The Lebanese American Journal,* in the Rosemary Hakim Collection that a beauty pageant was also part of the lineup. Hakim competed against two other finalists, winning a trophy and $500 ("Beauty Contest Winners"); however, it appears that the general American press did not take note of the pageant itself. The context of the Mahrajan and the organizers' persistence, however, indicate the importance of the event for the community. Matthew Stiffler's research into Christian Arab Americans' Self-Orientalism has shown that such festivals deliberately used positively connoted orientalist tropes from the *Arabian Nights* to promote their 'Arabness' in favorable ways—that is, in ways that were not too close to 'Muslim' Arabness (118). The introduction of a beauty pageant into this mix in 1954, though, is an entirely new development in the community's ethnic self-representation.

The event's ties to the Mokarzel family are another factor that can shed more light on the pageant's role in the community, and on women's public agency in Lebanese American history. The first "Miss Lebanon-America" pageant was organized by the Lebanese League of Progress and the Al-Hoda Publications in 1954; the same year Mary Mokarzel took over *Al-Hoda* as a general editor from her father Salloum Mokarzel. Salloum Mokarzel, the editor of *The Syrian World* from 1926 to 1932, ran *Al-Hoda* since the death of his brother Naoum Mokarzel in 1932 and was looking to retire in the 1950s. And Mary Mokarzel was to continue the family business (Suleiman "The Mokarzels" 84). In a conversation with Shakir in December 1992, Mary Mokarzel

remembers the outrage caused by this decision. She had been a member of the Syrian Ladies Junior League and active as a journalist, working for *Al-Hoda* from 1952 onwards. Her father and the subscribers wanted to keep the paper in the family and it took three years to prepare the transition. Mary and her sisters were brutally attacked by other Arab papers for their public roles, and one man even "said he'd jump from the window if she ran it. (…) When she took over, said to him, 'Now you can jump'" (Shakir, "Notes"). Despite such opposition, Mary Mokarzel took over and successfully ran *Al Hoda* and the *Lebanese American Journal* from 1955 to 1972. Even though the archive does not explicitly state this, it is plausible to assume that Mokarzel would have been a driving force in conceiving and introducing a beauty pageant into the annual Mahrajan.

The Mokarzel family's sponsorship of the pageant also implies a specific Maronite-Lebanese nationalist agenda. Hani Bawardi's research emphasizes that Syrian and Lebanese nationalisms among early Arab American communities were far from homogeneous (23-33). The Mokarzel family, who had founded both the Lebanese League of Progress in 1911 and *Al-Hoda* in 1898, were prominent advocates of Mount Lebanon's independence from the Ottoman empire (Gualitieri 11). However, after the French-British occupation of Syria after World War I, they supported the French mandate over Syria, which encompassed modern day Lebanon. Most other prominent Syrian-Lebanese Americans, such as Amheen Rihani,[73] always wanted full independence and pragmatically used their position as Arab Americans to lobby the US government for the Syrian cause. There is little research available on how the Mokarzel family's political affiliation to French hegemony and their own Lebanese nationalisms would have changed after the formal independence of Lebanon in 1943 into the 1950s. Caroline Attie sees this decade

[73] These different political views did not result in sectarian strife. Rihani was a regular contributor to *Al-Hoda*, but these diverging opinions testify to the heterogeneous and transnational political connections of Arab American communities before 1967 (Bawardi 7).

as the moment when French influence over Lebanon was receding: the French were busy fighting in Algeria. And, at the same time, US imperial ambitions started to turn toward Lebanon (5).

Hakim's public role as a beauty queen and her memoir reflect this particular historical moment quite directly. I will return to her more overt politics in the final section of this chapter, but want to note already here that Hakim proudly embraces Lebanese culture and never openly criticizes President Chamoun. However, politically, she sympathizes with General Nasser's pan-Arabism and anti-French colonial struggle, while supporting US imperial ambitions. As Miss Lebanon-America, Hakim thus faced an overlap between competing and co-operating forms of American and Lebanese nationalist interests that sought to instrumentalize the outcomes of the pageant. The main focus of my analysis here, then, rests on how Hakim manages these intersections between nationalisms, racial imaginaries and gendered beauty culture through her embodied and narrative adaptive agency.

Hakim wrote her first letter to President Chamoun on January 14th 1955. In return the minister Fouad Braidy invited her on behalf of the Tourism Commission to a one-month stay in Beirut (Braidy).[74] In correspondence conducted over the next few months, Braidy organizes Hakim's trip, accruing further sponsorship from Al-Italia and from the Beirut newspaper *Le Matine*. The early years of the Chamoun presidency were a golden age for Lebanon after decades of Ottoman and later French-British occupation, and the president declared 1955 a "homecoming year" to promote more tourism from the Lebanese diaspora to the homeland (Attie, *Struggle* 1-5). In his Opening Address for the official celebration of the "Homecoming Year" on July 21st, 1955, Chamoun praised the program as the perfect opportunity for the "sons" of the Lebanese diaspora

[74] In later newspaper articles Hakim disputes the suggestion she contacted the Lebanese government first, claiming she was invited, but the correspondence in the archive clearly marks that Hakim's initiative led to an exchange of letters.

to come home and see how far their "motherland" had progressed (Chamoun). During Hakim's trip through Lebanon her main duty, from the perspective of the Lebanese government, was to promote and embody exactly this kind of progress, as a *Lebanese* woman. At the same time, as a Lebanese *American* woman she could also validate the international judgment of the countries' modernity through her US perspective. Hakim frequently advertises airlines, tourist sights and consumer products: for example, she recommends "the middle [sic] Eastern part of the world to all tourists" (*Arabian* 10a). Such lines in her memoir closely echoes Chamoun's Homecoming Speech, in which he remarks that "those who are to return to their other homes will carry with them a desirable picture to their kin on the other side."

Hakim's timing thus placed her in the middle of Lebanese nation building, while her role as Miss Lebanon-America in the US also contributed to the emancipation of a Lebanese American ethnic identity (from the Syrian umbrella label) through her representative functions in the US. For example, an article in the *Detroit Times* on November 23rd, 1954, reported that she was the guest of honor at an anniversary celebration of Lebanese independence held in Detroit ("11th Anniversary"). The mutual pride in Lebanon and Lebanese Americans reflected in the correspondence and news pieces testifies to the close transnational ties between the two communities, particularly during the 1950s. Hakim, however, showed no interest in containing her public image within the confines of gendered, nationalist expectations. As a beauty queen, she also had access to the hegemonic ideals of 1950s American womanhood, which she then adapted for herself. In doing so, Hakim coined an elite cosmopolitan strand of Lebanese American ethnic community formation that could challenge certain US orientalist categories.

In the ever-shifting intersections of race and gender, Hakim's position as a beauty queen also supported her proximity to whiteness because 1950s beauty culture changed the boundaries of

respectability for white women in the US. African American women still could not afford any relaxation of their perceived respectability at the onset of the civil rights struggles (Fackler), but after World War II hegemonic ideas of Anglo American womanhood developed in two seemingly contradictory, yet related ways. On one hand, the cult of domesticity pushed women out of the workforce back to their homes (Friedan), while on the other popular culture celebrated sexual allure and bold, publicly visible womanhood through stardom (Juncker). Respectability remained important, but the allure of Hollywood stars offered new visions of American womanhood, not unlike the fictional circulations of New Womanhood in the early 1900s. Both ideals proposed more radical forms of independence than most women were prepared to incorporate into their daily lives at the time, but they shaped a horizon of possibility. The emphasis on (white) women's looks in beauty culture did not remove the norms for sexual purity underlying respectability, but such norms became more flexible: displays of women's sexual desirability had become 'normal,' perhaps even expected, characteristics of white, middle-class womanhood (Howard 594-7). This development also opened new possibilities for 'not-quite-white' Arab American women.

Beauty pageants functioned as a specific, publicly accepted performance of (white) women's desirability and patriotism. The most prominent pageant of them all was the Miss America pageant. It had been running locally as a tourist promotion in Atlantic City since 1924, and the first televised competition in 1954 raised the pageant to a national symbol. From 1959, every state was represented (Riverol 50-6). In the 1950s, various ethnic communities started to use the popularity of beauty pageants as platforms for self-fashioning, to contest racial Otherness, and to seek inclusion into American subjecthood. Representation via such beauty pageants offered ethnic community opportunities to shape their image toward the American public at large, and to communicate desired ideals and behaviors inwards to its members as well. The "Miss Lebanon-

America" pageant was thus part of a range of "ethnic" beauty pageants that negotiated access to hegemonic American subjecthood via beauty culture during the 1950s (Wu; McAndrews "Beauty", "Japanese"). For example, Judy Wu illustrates how the Miss Chinatown USA Beauty Pageant was at the same time a tourist event to garner revenues for Chinese Americans—a performance catering to orientalized audience expectations—*and* a way to define and celebrate Chinese American ethnic identity during the post-World War II era. The pageant represented the modernity/tradition of Chinese American women, and displayed communal agency that used orientalist reference frames against the grain (6-12). In general, self-organized ethnic beauty pageants offered a means to change ethnic representation and the communities' image (Howard 601).

For Lebanese or Chinese American pageants, the US orientalist context never disappeared, even if it was more 'flexible' for those two particular communities in the 1950s. Negative orientalist sentiment was still aimed at Japanese Americans, and the US sought to establish itself as a benevolent hegemon in the Middle East after World War II (McAlister 40-2). This post-war flexibility in US orientalist binaries and the idealized standards of womanhood of the 1950s were a specific window of historical opportunity for Hakim's confident claim to American whiteness domestically, while Lebanese nationalism and the Cold War context facilitated her transnational reach. Changes in beauty culture thus increased Hakim's possibilities for public agency, but those remained closely tied to 'good looks.' Just like respectability politics, beauty culture could enable and limit women. For example, Hakim's status and embodied performance as a beauty queen facilitated a career in diplomacy for her, but only in specifically gendered realms (promoting nationalism at social events or as a secretary at the UN). From the vantage point of adaptive agency, it is intriguing to see how Hakim's embodied performances drew on Hollywood scenarios

of white women's stardom to improve upon her personal situation within the confines of patriarchal beauty culture on both sides of the Atlantic. At times she adapted Hollywood subject positions to forgo her personal racial ambivalence as a Lebanese American woman; at other times she used her privilege to unsettle the racialization of Arab Otherness for her Muslim love interests. In either case, her public and personal adaptive agency were directly linked to her status as a beauty queen.

Bakirathi Mani locates the beauty pageant as an object or site that actively produces and challenges nationalist imagined communities (743). In a transnational context—as in the case of Hakim travelling as Miss Lebanon-America to Beirut—contestants must then perform certain nationalist narratives that work on both sides of the diaspora.[75] In this respect, Hakim's success works as a tale of uplift for Lebanese Americans in the US and as a symbol of national prosperity in Lebanon. Class is a determining factor in beauty pageants, particularly for ethnic communities that seek to present an idealized version of themselves that only allows a narrative of upward social mobility (Mani; Balogun). Hakim's story, rising from being a secretary at a flower seed company in Detroit to Miss Lebanon-America and a member of the UN staff, echoes earlier assimilation narratives like *Anna Ascends*. However, by the 1950s assimilation itself is not the overt issue anymore. Hakim certainly emphasized her class ascent, and how she was able to move in the high society of Beirut and New York. Rather than signifying ethnic invisibility, though, Hakim used this privileged position to celebrate her Arabic heritage—and, as shown below, to adapt the subject position of the Anglo heroine in sheik-themed episodes in her memoir.

[75] As a spectacle, beauty pageants also resonate with the ways orientalist imaginaries regulate womanhood and sexuality. Orientalist representations have deployed images of women as odalisques, harem girls, belly dancers and veiled 'mysteries' for centuries, while American women's bodies have often been regulated via displays of American patriarchal beauty standards, not least at beauty pageants (Kahf, *Western Representations*; Wolf). Hakim is located at the intersection of these discourses, and she utilizes the visibility these stereotypes afford to recast what it means to be an Arab American woman in 1955.

In sum, beauty culture and the iconic status of Hollywood actresses appear to have facilitated new adaptive reference frames. Hakim's self-conscious display of sexual attraction shows no fear of being associated with exotic, racial Otherness in harem fantasies; on the contrary, she seems to court these sensationalist fantasies, but from the 'safe' position of the US heroine which allowed her to make a strong claim to proximity to whiteness despite her Arab heritage. Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, Hakim would have been familiar with film stars like Lara Turner, Hedy Lamarr and Marilyn Monroe, who offered templates of self-confident, sexy (and white) women and forged their own careers in the public eye, albeit in what remained a highly misogynistic society. Clara Juncker notes that Monroe's versatility and public success was intimately linked to how her body interacted with the dominant discourses around her (75). Ethnic beauty pageants offered a more localized, graduated access to this kind of celebrity womanhood, but representations of Hakim's body, both in life events on tour as a beauty queen and in USIS photography, could also reflect *and* challenge surrounding dominant discourses.

Hakim's portrait (fig. 19), taken by the American consulate during her stay in Beirut in 1955, is a case in point. Hakim wears a black sunback dress, in style reminiscent of Monroe's clothe choices. Her hair-do and the Mediterranean backdrop also evoke associations with Italian Hollywood stars like Sophia Loren, which maintains a certain racial ambivalence of 'not-quite-white' immigrant womanhood. And yet, the setup and her embodied representation clearly participate in an American Hollywood scenario and Hakim appears to proudly displays her sexual appeal to the camera.

Figure 19. *Rosemary Hakim by the sea (2)*, July 1955. Photo in Rosemary Hakim Collection, Arab American National Museum

As this image was taken by US officials in Beirut the boundaries between staged representation and self-representation remain blurred. However, Hakim's memoir makes frequent references to her personal preference for sunback dresses, also as a symbolic opposite to (veiled) Muslim women's backwardness (*Arabian* 5). I will return to the more explicit traces of Hakim's own adaptive agency below, but it is worth noting that this promotional picture uses Hakim's embodied

presence to reflect multiple discourses and address different audiences at the same time. Just like the Lebanese government, the USIS sized the fact that Hakim could represent Arab, American and modern womanhood for their own agenda.

The versatility of Hakim's body to mirror different nationalist agendas and discursive ideals of womanhood thus facilitated her public reach. However, race does not disappear from the public staging and framing of her appearance as a Lebanese American woman, even if Hakim's embodied and narrative adaptive agency can push it to the background. As an ethnic beauty queen, Hakim's representation of her community remains intimately linked to dominant tropes of modernity, embedded in notions of progressive versus traditional womanhood. For Hakim, this symbolic burden always entails the danger of either getting caught in exotic Otherness herself, or in participating in gestures of imperial superiority that reinforce Arab Otherness. To avoid such pitfalls Hakim must at once reconcile the relative privilege of proximity to 'whiteness'—the ability to move as ethnically unmarked in American society—with highly racialized orientalist representations of 'Arabs' in US popular culture. She may not always succeed at this balancing act, and Hakim is not an anti-racist activist. However, I argue that we can see her attempts at negotiating US racial tropes through the *narrative* adaptive agency of her memoir—at times such attempts generate surprising affective force.

Hakim's Self-Writing

Hakim's memoir *Arabian Antipodes* offers a rarely acknowledged vision of modern Arab American womanhood in her time. Men and romantic interests remain a central trope, but marriage is not. On the contrary, Hakim asserts her modernity and Americanness by dating a range of different men without ever settling down. She still heeds boundaries of traditional respectability,

both in Lebanese and US contexts, with regard to sexual purity. The memoir emphasizes that she never had intimate dealings with these men. At the same time, it describes her glamorous life as a single, working woman. Hakim's primary concerns revolve around dinner parties, dates, night clubs and public signs of male affection. She positions her independence and agency as explicitly American traits, and, in this section, I explore in more detail how her selective adaptation of modern Lebanese American womanhood engages with US racial tropes.

Life writing, as a genre of narrative self-representation, offers a fertile ground for adaptive agency. In its simplicity, Hakim's memoir seems to confirm the assumption that life writing is as a straight-forward act of self-representation: "Yet this act is anything but simple, for the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation" (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 1). Memoirs and other kinds of autobiographical texts blur boundaries between the private and the public, between history and fiction, as well as between individual and collective memories. Rather than using the term autobiography, coming out of an exclusionary legacy of eurocentric, enlightenment perspectives on a unified subject, Smith and Watson suggest the term 'life writing' to open the genre to postcolonial self-representations as well. They further distinguish the genre designation of life writing from what they call 'life narrative,' "a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital" (4). Hakim's self-representation works across both these performative and narrative modes, connected through her body/embodiment. Life writing requires the embodied presence of an author as a locus for memory and referentiality to material experiences. Memory, and its narrativization, are in turn selective processes prone to adapting already circulating tropes to make sense of experiences. In these processes, 'non-white' authors

likely perceive the impact of race on their material experiences much more acutely than 'white' writers. Traces of narrative adaptive agency in memoirs, in tropes and references used to frame experiences, can thus reveal how life writing works with both the fictional and the experiential dimensions of racial imaginaries.

Hakim's memoir develops its force not as a seemingly 'true' representation of her life, but out of this narrative complexity between multiple voices, tropes and cultural references. Hakim 'speaks' to her readers, which develops a distinct affective impact (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 79). Her oscillation between narrating, narrated and ideological "I"s directs her readers' attention and curates a specific image of herself and others. Her recognizable adaptations of dominant racial and gendered tropes offer a window into how Arab American racial ambivalence impacts her life writing as an "intersubjective process" between reader and writer. Any analysis here has to account for the fact that the "complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, socio cultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text" (13). If Hakim's narrative performance of modern womanhood, in proximity to Arab culture *and* American whiteness, is to 'succeed,' her readers need to understand and accept the reference frames she is using. Her access to such dominant tropes hinges on her material experience and credibility as a beauty queen, but her narrative agency in crafting her memoir should not be taken for 'truth': "To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions" (13). Following Smith and Watson' theorization of life writing, adaptive agency in narrative self-representation is an element of its intersubjective processes, shaped not by what her memoir is in terms of genre, but by what it does.

For the most part, Hakim's narrative voice performs a positive affective re-orientation of Arabness. She emphasizes her Lebanese heritage and her intimate connection to the Middle East through language, culture and family:

> How grateful I was during those first weeks that I could understand and speak Arabic and so could really enjoy meeting everyone. How dreadful it would have been for me to sit in every night with a house full of people and not understand a word, but as it was, I was most comfortable and at times had to remind myself that I actually was in the Middle Eastern part of the world—and not just spending an evening with relatives in Detroit. As things became more clear to me in the following days, I found that the average young person like myself spoke at least three languages—Arabic, French and English—and I thought of how smug we were at home content with English only (*Arabian* 3).

The final sentence, Hakim's reference to "how smug we were," identifies with an American perspective, while the overall description of her ease and sense of belonging emplaces Hakim ethno-culturally as Lebanese as well. She is able to speak Arabic, and she understands enough to blend in with her friends' and family's fluency in Arabic, English, and French. Her family must have been part of the well-off, cosmopolitan Lebanese Maronite circles, a fact that contributes to the blurring of national boundaries and helps Hakim to claim a transnational Lebanese American womanhood and belonging. The last sentence even professes a sense of cosmopolitan superiority over Americans who only speak English. Her ethnic-self-identification performs here the 'productive tension' between being Lebanese and American at once.

This tension comes with a specifically gendered dimension. Hakim celebrates her Lebanese ethnic identity via a proud attachment to Arabic language and heritage, but in her performance of modern womanhood she positions herself as an American. For example, when she walks along a beach with her friend she sees a group of young Kuwaitis hanging out by the water. Her friend refuses to go, drawing an implicit contrast to Arab women who would never approach and chat up a group of young men sitting on a beach, but Hakim writes: "It was immaterial to me and since I knew that a certain amount of brashness was expected of Americans, I was tempted to take advantage of this general attitude" (28). She repeats a similar reasoning a few months later, when she is back in New York and about to call a Kuwaiti diplomat who has come to town. On this occasion, she specifically frames her brashness as a trait of American women: "I took a chance and relied upon the Asiatic impression that a certain amount of brashness is expected from Americans, particularly the American women" (29). It is impossible to generalize about the highly heterogeneous experiences of different Arab Americans with US racial classifications and anti-Arab racism in daily life, but Hakim's comments here reflect a pre-1967 tendency to tie Arab racial Otherness to Asian origins. Hakim's view of Kuwaitis and other non-Lebanese Arabs as 'Asians' places herself on the white side of the US color line, but specters of Islam as markers for racial Otherness also already permeate the memoir—pointing to the confluence of immigration and orientalist discourses in maintaining Arab American racial ambivalence.

In her elite cosmopolitan subject position, Hakim's performance of white/modern *and* Arab/American womanhood easily transcends national boundaries. Glamour, night life, dating and women's financial independence were traits equally found in Beirut middle and upper-class life, and these circulations of globalized modernity allowed Hakim to reconcile the tensions between Arabness and Americanness in her own subject position—for example, by extending her own

imagined Arab/American womanhood to include her female Lebanese cousin Tony. Tony functions as her doppelgänger figure: "How lovely Tony is, I thought. Here is a cousin I've found on the other side of the world – a cousin as modern and fun loving as myself" (7). The quality of fun loving modern womanhood unites Hakim with her cousin, claiming the female peer-generation on the Beirut side of her family as equally 'modern.' Together they represent a form of transnational Arab American womanhood based on being 'honorary white' and proxy-American —in a Lebanese context. Once Hakim returned to the US, the limits of her own ambivalent claim to American whiteness, through adaptive agency, became apparent. In her letter to the Lebanese president Chamoun, she worked with the right registers of Lebanese nationalisms and achieved her goals seamlessly. However, when she attempted a similar feat, reaching out to the US president Eisenhower upon her return from Beirut, her adaptation of American nationalisms failed.

In the Eisenhower letter, Hakim over-performs her Americanness to an inadvertently comic effect. She opens by stating "Just thought you'd like to know, as one American to another, about the kind of treatment I received from the country of Lebanon while visiting there." She goes on to detail how she represented the American youth as Miss Lebanon-America: "The reception, publicity and attention given me as an American by President Chamoun, the Lebanese Government and the Lebanese people was overwhelming. Such wonderful treatment couldn't have been more royal—unless it were for you. I was really very proud to be an American" ("Letter to U.S.") In her collegial and colloquial tone, Hakim crossed various US American class, gender and racial boundaries; but in contrast to her successful letter to Chamoun, there is no record of any reaction by the Eisenhower administration. Her adaptive choices reflect that she was aware of dominant tropes of the US as a non-hierarchical and inclusive imagined community, an ideal she was projecting as an 'ethnic' American beauty queen overseas. However, her personal adaptive agency

disregarded the harsh realities of racisms and racial segregation obscured by these post-war ideals, as well as the fact that her position as a woman and her ethnic location as Arab American excluded her from domestic circulations of Anglo-American nationalism. The affective registers of modern, bold American womanhood were reserved for Hollywood and overseas Cold War diplomacy. In the US, as a Lebanese American beauty queen, Hakim remained not quite white.

It is thus the first chapters in her memoir that describe her stay in Beirut that reveal most about how Hakim negotiated racial ambivalences through her adaptive agency. In June 1955, Hakim landed in Beirut. Local press and representatives welcomed her, but she was immediately whisked away by her aunt and uncle, who insisted on her staying with them instead of lodging at one of the city's finest hotels. Her memoir reflects a certain split between Hakim's family life, her public personae on official duty and her private life, which plays out at nightclubs and revolves around her romantic quest for Marzouk. On the smaller scale of her immediate family, Hakim seeks to celebrate her Lebanese relative's modernity. Racial ambivalence, her own and her family's, is never far from the surface, and she uses an auto-orientalist lens to describe her own relatives and experiences as a Lebanese American beauty queen. For example, Hakim states that "The life of the average Lebanese family living in the city is as modern as any Western world country (…)" (*Arabian* 5). This attempt to erase borders and to claim her Lebanese heritage as "Western" re-inscribes a whole range of other implicit differences. Hakim's imagined average Lebanese family in all likelihood did not include Muslim Lebanese citizens (the Muslims she describes are Kuwaiti), and she replicates urban/countryside as well as East/West binaries, even while extending urban modernity as a metaphor for an American/Western way of life to the 'average' Lebanese family living in Beirut.

In addition to accounts of their shared cultural heritage, Hakim uses descriptions of domestic and urban spaces as well as clothing choices to establish her vision of a modern 'Lebanese' civilization that is easily compatible with American standards. Upon entering her aunt's home for the first time, she proclaims "(…) it was unbelievable—here I was sitting in Aunt Adele's house in Beirut—and it was nothing at all like as I expected. It was lovelier [sic] than my own home" (2). She praises the house as being even better than her own American home, which normalizes her family as being modern, rich, and thus quasi-American, even while her surprise at this fact belies her association of her parent's homeland with Otherness. This sense of implied Othering intensifies in Hakim's overemphasis on cleanliness, which comes to represent virtuous womanhood and civilizational modernity all at once. The passage that describes Aunt Adele's house mentions multiple times how the domestic space was "immaculately kept," "spotless" or "ringing with modern furniture and the feeling of 'what a good house-keeper I have'" (2).

Both Hakim's surprise and her focus on cleanliness and order in domestic spaces echoes what Amy Kaplan defined as manifest domesticity: "'Manifest Domesticity' turns an imperial nation into a home by producing and colonizing specters of the foreign that lurk inside and outside its ever shifting borders" (602). Kaplan's definition links domestic ideals, women at the center of managing proper, white middle-class homes, to the simultaneous ambitions of American empire in manifest destiny to employ 'female' influence in domesticating the foreign abroad and within the domestic self. These multiple meanings of the domestic and of domestication underlie Hakim's self-fashioning, in that her quest for white middle-class womanhood pushes her to civilize the foreign not only in her encounter with the oriental Other, but within herself. Even though she manages via her performance of modern womanhood to smoothly link her Arab and her American

heritage on the surface, her perception of Arab ethnicity as Other, in her family and thus implicitly in herself, maintains a sense of Arab American racial ambivalence.

It is also worth noting that Hakim's performance of modern womanhood remains within the confines of voluntary submission that characterize 1950's US patriarchy through beauty culture and family norms in ways that extend even to Beirut. Hakim can be a desirable woman who goes out, dates men and is bold in public space, but she has to be a 'good girl' who comes home and sleeps at her aunt's house at night as well. Melani McAlister defines such 'voluntary submission' as a key component of 1950s notions of American womanhood: a discourse that constructs American women as independent, but only if these women then submit to their family or to a benevolent US patriarchy as a 'free choice' (68). Hakim's self-representation performs such a voluntary submission multiple times. She gladly obliges, for example, her aunt's wish that she should stay at their house in Beirut, rather than the Capitol Hotel, even though she later complains in her memoir how life changing it would have been to stay at the same hotel as Marzouk (11). She also submits to an unsolicited prolongation of her stay in Beirut. Lebanese officials simply rebooked Hakim's ticket and notified her employer in Detroit of her extended absence, presenting Hakim with a fait accompli (21). Voluntary submission regulates young women's sexualities, but it is also key to the export of idealized American womanhood in a Cold War context. Metaphorical affinities merge here with political expectations; just like 'free' American women submit to the wishes of their families, so do cultural diplomacy tours push 'independent' states to 'voluntary' alignment with US imperial supremacy.

Hakim reveals little about her American relatives in the memoir, but her Lebanese aunt and uncle feature prominently: "Getting acquainted with Aunt Adele and Uncle Najeeb was so interesting—more like reading a book than meeting relatives" (2). Such moments of dis-

identification with her local family are very subtle, but they reveal the transnational power differential in Hakim's position as a Lebanese American who on the one hand identifies with her Arab heritage and culture, but also employs an US orientalist gaze when visiting her own relatives. Hakim never mentions the particular "book" she has in mind, but the conceptualization of her relatives as "books", or narratives, replicates the orientalist position of knowing the East through literature, paintings or research. I take her statement as indicative of the way she uses adaptive agency in writing her memoir: she makes deliberate references to circulating discourses and narratives that then also define Hakim's own subject position in presenting herself to potential American and Arab American audiences.

Among her most traditional representative strategies are her auto-orientalist adaptations of the Holy Land trope. She uses these references to bolster her authorial credibility for American audiences, very much in line with the first generation of Arab American writers, such as Ameen Rihani and Kahlil Gibran, who gained access to hegemonic US discourses by claiming authorial agency as Arab American native informants from the Holy Land (Hassan 81-97). Hakim dedicates a whole chapter (10a-22) to describing her rapture at visiting holy Christian sites in Jerusalem, which at once allows her to perform as native informant *and* as tourist partaking in the American fascination with the Holy Land—a double move to claim her Arab Christian heritage as essentially American. Furthermore, Hakim's memoir also compares streets, shops, and houses in Beirut or other cities in the region to an imagined Holy Land scenery that resembles the "days of Christ," even if geographically speaking the typical Holy Land would only be in Palestine. Her Holy Land references work within the imaginary-orientalist knowledge economy of the US, and Hakim evokes an orientalist sense of a timeless and unchanged past that she mediates for her intended American audience:

> Here were streets crowded with the ancient dress of Arab men and women almost exactly as they were in the days of Christ. It is a common sight to see mysterious women heavily veiled from head to foot walking along side of other women wearing the latest fashion in sun back dresses (5).

Here Hakim draws on not only orientalist Holy Land nostalgia, but also the idea of "Arab modernity" manifest through the shape of women's dress on the street. Hakim's gendered auto-Orientalism rarely addresses race directly, but the contrast in women's dress establishes orientalist notions of Eastern backwardness and Western modernity even more forcefully than the Holy Land framework. What is more, as a beauty queen Hakim represents such modernity in her own public, attractive performance of womanhood in both American and Lebanese contexts—as indicted above in the USIS portrait of *Hakim by the ocean* (see fig. 18). She likely identified with the fashionable women in the "sun back dresses," claiming these women in the street as a projection screen for a certain kind of Lebanese-Arab modernity that is compatible with her American views on womanhood.

In many instances, Hakim uses tropes of modern womanhood to reconcile US specific friction between her ethnic affiliations as Lebanese and American in a pan-Arab, elite vision. But there remains one major exception: Arab Muslim women. Her representations of Muslim women use the specter of Islam to place them outside of what she perceives to be Arabness, invoking an oppositional self-definition of herself as a white Christian Lebanese American woman in contrast to "oppressed" Muslim women:

> Moslem women are seldom seen in the streets—and never after sundown. They are veiled and completely undistinguishable.—are these women happy, I wondered? How can they tolerate so much clothing in such humid weather? Are they content to be hidden behind veils all their lives? (10b)

Hakim's presentation of Muslim women as an "undistinguishable," monolithically unhappy mass adapts here the orientalist legacies of the Muslimwoman. Her oppositional adaptive agency echoes with the argumentative choices of the Syrian American women commentators in *The Syrian World* described in chapter two, who also adapted the trope of oppressed *and* backward Muslim women to claim their own modernity. Hakim too positions the veiled women she sees as backwards, a foil against which she can define her own superior, fashionable and 'modern' (in contemporary terms 'liberated') Arab American womanhood. However, by racializing *Arab* Muslim women Hakim's gendered auto-Orientalism unwittingly unsettles the stability of unmarked Arab Americanness that she seeks to claim for her Christian Lebanese community on both sides of the Atlantic.

Arabian Antipodes and *The Sheik*

Hakim draws a sharp contrast between herself and the Muslim women she observes. However, her representations of the Muslim men she seeks to date, in Beirut and in New York, at least partially challenge the logic of un-Arab/American Islam versus American Christian Arabness that we have seen in the 1920s marriage debates in *The Syrian World* and in other instances of earlier Syrian American community formation. Hakim never entirely dissolves the implied ethnic difference between *her* Arab Americanness and *their* Arabness, but she uses adaptive agency to manage this ambivalence. I will focus in this section on her two main romantic interests—

Marzouk in Beirut and the Saudi prince Fahad in New York—and on how Hakim's memoir adapts elements from *The Sheik* movie to frame her Christian/Muslim romances. As a narrator, her subject positions include the American beauty queen and the Arab native informant, but her perhaps most idiosyncratic intervention into gendered auto-Orientalism is her forging of a position as the 'Anglo' Arab American romantic heroine.

Hakim invokes harem fantasies by drawing on the sexual allure of virile desert sheik figures, popularized through the Hollywood adaptations of Edith Maude Hull's 1919 novel *The Sheik*. Mull's novel was adapted for the big screen in 1921 and the image of the virile, rich desert sheik remained one of the most popular orientalist tropes of the 1950s (McAlister 25-30). In its various adaptations, sheik narratives usually involve an American/British woman travelling to the desert where she is either abducted by and/or falls in love with an oriental sheik. In *The Sheik*, playing on anxieties about miscegenation, the sheik turns out to be actually a European orphan, thus "biologically" white and able to exert restraint or exhibit respect toward the Anglo woman he abducted. Hakim's use of *The Sheik* tropes in *Arabian Antipodes* is thus an adaptation of domestic circulations of already established tropes of US Orientalisms in popular culture, rather than an auto-orientalist, cross-cultural translation.

The relationship between life writing, as a form of narrative self-representation, and adaptive agency offers here new perspectives on how Hakim manages Arab American racial ambivalence and her relationality to ethnic Others. Life writing, both in postcolonial contexts and by ethnic minorities within the US, has often served as a way to re-assert cultural agency for marginalized subjects, using and challenging eurocentric norms of autobiography (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 59). Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a seminal example for life writing that refuses to replicate hegemonic ideological categories in self-narration. She rather uses self-writing to re-

write her own sense of self beyond racial, gendered and heteronormative reference frames. Also in less revolutionary forms of life writing, narrative voice is a performative act that works through multiple layers, including an ideological "I," that is "the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story" (76). This formal multiplicity in narrative voices complements Hakim' performative, embodied self-representation as a Lebanese American beauty queen. Together they define and enable a degree of adaptive agency in her relationships to the racial, sexual, classed and gendered categories of personhood that surround her. As mentioned above, through life writing there always remains a referentiality to the material world. Hakim, unlike Anzaldúa, does not openly disassemble hegemonic categories, and she seeks to identify as a white American woman. However, in presenting herself as the Anglo Arab American heroine in a sheik romance, Hakim creates 'impossible' subject positions that not only upset orientalist East/West binaries, but also implicitly re-orient the racial logics of Hollywood productions—even if that is not Hakim's expressed intention.

By adapting sheik tropes, Hakim engaged with the male-centered strands of US orientalist stereotypes as well. Amira Jarmakani's earlier work traced how oriental masculinity was, by the beginning of the twentieth century, reduced to stereotypes of lazy, somewhat oppressive, but essentially benign sheiks. Her more recent work on the post-9/11 popularity of sheik narratives in romance novels follows up on how these earlier versions of sheikdom morphed into the contemporary perception of Muslim men as terrorists in the 20th century. Departing from the dangerously sexy "fierce desert man" ("The sheik" 996) of Hollywood adaptations in the 1920s, who would only reveal his softer/human side to the heroine, the image of the sheik in US popular culture took a sharp turn with the 1973 oil crisis. Imaginations of greedy and evil oil sheiks, who wanted to harm the American nation, merged the earlier Hollywood tropes with scenarios of

economic threat through late capitalism, as well as the even older tropes of Ottoman despots who imprison white women in their harems. While Hull's *The Sheik* framed her protagonist as a European orphan to avoid the specter of miscegenation, later versions of sheiks emphasized their ethnic Otherness—not in a material or historical sense, but as a "racialized figure of the Arab/Muslim/sheikh/terrorist" (997).

Contemporary sheik figures in romance novels draw on all of these historical layers, but add a renewed focus on discourses about the war on terror. In such narratives, Anglo heroines usually work with sheiks, who are American allies, to counter terrorist plots and weapons of mass destruction. Desire and fear are intimately linked in these romances and, through a love story and the heroine's voluntary submission to hyper-masculine sheiks, such narratives cater to neoliberal multiculturalism and a global feminist vision of women's liberation (1001-3). Hakim's memoir—written in the late 1950s—anticipates some of these contemporary developments. The war on terror is not part of her repertoire, but her memoir adapts its precursor tropes: being imprisoned in a sheik's harem, the mix of sexual attraction and threat of rape, as well as the exotic appeal of desert/Middle Eastern settings and of sheiks as royalty—complete with the temptation of being a "princess bride" (998). On the other hand, Hakim also refutes basic racial assumptions of the genre. Blending fictional tropes and her own memory of lived, embodied experiences as Miss Lebanon America, Hakim's Arab American heroine falls for sheik figures not just for their dangerous sex appeal, but mainly for their shared Arab cultural reference frame.

In *Arabian Antipodes*, the Saudi prince Fahad appears as the quintessential sheik—even more so than the Kuwaiti businessman Marzouk. Photographs and other archival material document Hakim's and Fahad's meetings in New York. They saw each other over a span of three years and had a personal relationship in the late 1950s. Written in hindsight, the narrating "I" looks

back at the development and end of their relationship. Hakim uses sheik tropes to frame how her narrated "I" explains both her attraction to Fahad and their failure as a couple. New York is not a Middle Eastern desert, but his status as Saudi prince and the exceptional world of UN diplomatic circles offer a distinct space for Hakim to adapt these specific US orientalist imaginations. Fahad is royalty and Hakim a 'commoner,' but also a beauty *queen*. Royalty works here on multiple levels: the orientalist imagery of sheiks, political concepts of monarchy, and not least Hakim's own status as a beauty queen. Within the restrictions of 1950s beauty culture, it is her looks that facilitate her access to 'royalty.' She easily attracts Fahad's attention. As an American woman, though, she cannot enter his personal circle officially. He further constantly "reminded me of my place" (53). Fahad's Saudi sensibilities about women's roles, as a prince from the most conservative Muslim nation in the Middle East, often conflict with Hakim's desires for public recognition and independence. She also notes the complete absence of women in the Saudi delegation and that no royal talked about their wives or daughters: "Should I expect to be included in the missing women should I someday become one of the Royal Family?" (*Extra 3* 8). Her memoir thus contains potential for a proto-feminist critique, but she does not seriously address women's rights. Rather, anticipating the transition from imperial to global feminism,[76] she uses the absent Saudi women as a foil for her own Christian Lebanese American superiority—including

[76] Despite its professed concern for Muslim women, 'global feminism' has helped to promote the contemporary peak in negative and orientalist stereotypes by practicing a triumphant feminist discourse that constructs Western women's 'freedom' in opposition to Muslim women's 'victimhood' (see Abu Loghud; Lazreg; Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber). Contrary to intersectional and transnational feminisms, global feminisms detach sexism from racism. Leti Volpp argues that "to posit feminism and multiculturalism as oppositional is to assume that minority women are victims of their cultures" (1185). This old argument opposes race to gender and already provided a theoretical basis for imperial feminism prior to global feminisms, because it renders certain cultures or religions as inherently violent against women, while turning a blind eye to Western culture's oppression of women. It thus posits Other women will be better off without their respective cultures, which not only obscures the agency of women within patriarchal societies, but also condones and even encourages US violent interventions.

racializing specters of sexual threat and potential oppression if Hakim were to marry Fahad, turning herself into an invisible Muslimwoman.

To explain why Hakim engaged with a Saudi prince in the first place, *The Sheik* frames are indispensable. As the dangerously sexy sheik he *aggressively* pursues her in the years of courtship in New York. They meet at a concert at the Islamic Convention in New York and Hakim describes how her ambivalent feelings of attraction and threat shaped their relationship from the start. She is fascinated by his "unusual" green eyes (43/1) and his Arabic pronunciation—she claims it is "the most beautifully spoken Arabic I have ever heard, as simple and pure as one can imagine" (45/3). At the same time, she describes his look as "sharp, demanding, distrustful" (43/1) and his voice as "firm, demanding, frightening" (45/3). So even though we find here again the pattern that she positions Arabic language and culture as a connector, Hakim frames Fahad's courtship as unwanted advances that she reluctantly submits to on a platonic level—always maintaining that she fights off any sexualized conduct. Whenever Fahad attempts to kiss her she pushes him away, but they nevertheless continue to meet—even in his hotel room. In one episode Hakim hesitates at the door, when he commands her to enter. This moment echoes the scene in *The Sheik* when Diana is forced to attend a dinner at the sheik's tent. Sensing Hakim's fear, Fahad first suggests leaving the door to his hotel room open, only to close it once Hakim has entered. The specter of rape and Fahad's potential oriental deceitfulness become palpable, but then Fahad, just like the sheik, demonstrates his superior masculinity through restraint: "You are quite safe, I have already told you. Undoubtedly I would not force my desire on one so unwilling. You have already declared yourself, more than one time (…) Either you trust me—or you don't" (47/-).

In Hakim's memoir, Fahad's ethnic Muslim Arabness is not in question. She routes this restraint not through a racializing view via biology like Hull, but rather through class and culture.

When they meet again at a UN reception, with the Saudi royal family in attendance in traditional clothes, she is relieved to see Fahad in a Western style black suit. She then links this relief to her fear that if he were present in Arabic clothes she might lose faith in his 'Westerness,' "deceiving myself into believing that because he dressed as such, he would act as such" (*Extra 3* 7). Clothes remain an important marker for Hakim's vision of American Arabness, and even though she cannot trust Fahad to 'really' be an American, she is again smitten by his majestic, royal appearance.

Fahad's royalty is his main appeal for Hakim, but in a next step she has to then also frame the end of their relationship despite this enormous appeal. Here the trope of harem 'prisoner' offers Hakim a way out. Interspersed with more sympathetic portrayals of Fahad, and for his potential for sweetness (48/5), Hakim uses a dream sequence to insert the potential scenario of herself as a prisoner in Fahad's harem—signifying the threat to her freedom as an American woman if she were to marry him. In the dream Fahad locks her into his palace, where veiled women prepare her for the wedding night with jewels and fine clothes. Hakim manages then to escape with the help of her mother. The narrator positions this dream as clear warning (49), foreshadowing the failure of their relationship.

This failure is a key distinction to Anglo-centric sheik narratives. Jarmakani points out that through the successful union of the Anglo heroine and the Arab sheik, desert romances usually position the couple as a (superficial) bridge between the East and West ("The sheik" 1003). Such romantic resolution supports the US efforts in the war on terror, as in contemporary novels the sheik would then reform his 'backward' country/culture or help catch the terrorists. Hakim's memoir appears at the early onset of US military dominance and economic globalization, and she frames her falling out with Fahad not just in orientalist, but also in US nationalist/imperialist terms. Her emphasis on republicanism is an anti-monarchy stance that can be read in the context of the

US taking over imperial hegemony in the Middle East from the British. Hakim expands upon her reasoning noting that "Yes, I am a commoner—an American and proud. I am also a Christian and I'm proud." She continues by stating "it is he who can never be accepted by my family—it is he who is a prince therefore not recognized by Americans; he is a Moslem therefore impossible to even consider marriage with me or any Christian, he is foreigner, a Saudi Arabian, and therefore in many aspects inferior to me" (55). After a final fight over the phone, where Fahad reacts "violently" toward her absence the previous evening, Hakim ends their relationship: "All of a sudden, I was American again. Royalty meant nothing to me" (*Extra 3* 8). Hakim's critique of Fahad focuses less on her inferior status in Saudi (and US) patriarchies, but she turns to US nationalisms to assert her ethnic superiority. As an "American" she should have never fallen for a royal and, echoing Syrian American anxieties about Christian/Muslim marriages in the late 1920s, she rules out cross-religious Christian/Muslim romance.

Hakim's adaptations of sheik tropes already resonate with the three types of representation Nadine Naber defines as typical for contemporary representations of Arabs in mass media: a) violently misogynist men b) passive victimized women vs idealized free white American women and c) the "absent Arab women" when stories revolve around white women who escape from patriarchal Arab men (37). In her framing of Fahad, Hakim's romantic auto-Orientalism in the late 1950s anticipates these types. Yet the first six chapters of her memoir offer a different approach to Muslim men as well. These chapters recount her romantic quest for Marzouk during her stay in Beirut, and also draw on sheik themes. Here too Muslim Arab women are absent/Othered, and Hakim positions herself as the free, white American woman. However, her representation of Marzouk challenges the first of Naber's categories—he is neither overtly misogynistic nor violent, and Hakim even goes to great length to defend his humanity 'despite' his Muslim faith. The

romance thus constitutes a resolution of 'East' and 'West' of sorts, but with affective and political effects that diverge from typical sheik narratives.

In my entire archive for this dissertation, this is the only case of a positive framing of a Christian/Muslim romantic liaison, even if Hakim is still careful not to associate herself too closely with Muslim Otherness. Her choice of the title "Arabian Antipodes" is telling in this respect. It could refer to multiple reference points of Arab diversity in Hakim's memoir, such as the Lebanese diaspora communities on both sides of the Atlantic, or to the different religious and ethnic affiliations among Arabs, but it is also a direct allusion to Hakim and Marzouk (and to a lesser degree to Fahad) as a romantic couple. They are both Arab, but Hakim is Maronite Lebanese and Marzouk a Muslim Kuwaiti businessman. The notion of an "Antipode" implies the largest possible distance between two places, marking the ethnic difference between Hakim and her lovers, but "Arabian" functions, at the same time, as a transnational umbrella that nevertheless connects them. Through her multiple subject positions, Hakim as a narrator then stages not only a discovery of this joint Arab cultural sphere, but she also 'discovers' the individual humanity and likability of Marzouk.

In many ways, Hakim's trip to Beirut would have been the ideal setup for a typical sheik narrative and an orientalist desert scenario. Her material experiences in the urban, cosmopolitan scene of Beirut compel Hakim to frame her romantic interest in Marzouk differently. In both of her romantic subplots, Hakim departs from a physical description of Marzouk's and Fahad's oriental, masculine Otherness to gradually humanize them through personal insights. Hakim's first encounter with Marzouk takes place on the plane ride to Lebanon, and she describes him as a "dark, oriental looking man" (1). Throughout the narration of her days in Beirut, however, Hakim complicates this stereotypical image in an inner dialogue (between her narrative voices and an

implied reader) that quite literally performs a gradual discovery of Arab ethnic heterogeneity through her encounters with Marzouk in various nightclubs and hotel lobbies. The humanization begins with her realization that "Marzouk, like so many tourists in Beirut in the summer is from the country of Kuwait—the land of oil" (9). She starts to translate his Muslim Arabness to her potential American audience in more nuanced terms than monolithic orientalist East/West binaries usually allow. Marzouk is not an oil sheik, but it turns out that he is in the construction business in Kuwait, and that they share a subject position as tourists in Beirut's cosmopolitan elite spaces.

> He was a millionaire, Tony said, in the building and contracting business there. Kuwait—I thought? Where is it? I have never heard of it? What nationality is it and what language is spoken there? Could it be that it is Arabic—but in a dialect—of course! That must be why I couldn't understand him very well (9).

Hakim speaks here first from an American point of view in that she dramatizes her discovery of all these facts as a complete surprise, while the realization that she and Marzouk share an Arabic heritage and language that locates them both within the umbrella of Arab heterogeneity.

Despite this cultural connection, Hakim also speculates about the potential oriental Otherness of Marzouk: for example, his sheik-like social status in Beirut, possible other wives, and potential criminality.

> It wasn't until sometime later that I found out that the country of Kuwait is almost 100% Moslem, the men there allowed by their religion to have four wives. This, of course, is frowned upon by other religious sects, particularly in Lebanon.—the fog was lifting [sic]. But is Marzouk married? Am I given to understand that he is? (…)—or is it that they just don't want it known that he is Kuwaiti? It was difficult to understand how a man such as he could be judged and placed in such a position

> merely because of his religion. From the time we spend with him, I found him to be as gentlemanly, good natured, educated and dignified as Europeans or Americans. (…) Perhaps if there were not so much mystery surrounding him—he would not loom so prominent in my mind. (…) What is everyone hiding? Does he already have four wives—is he of royal blood—is he wanted by the authorities—of [sic] Just what is it? (9)

Marzouk remains elusive and eventually disappears before they ever have a serious date. Hakim's narrative thus has ample ground for speculation that allows her to both challenge and draw on the sensationalist currency of orientalist stereotypes. Hakim refutes orientalist stereotypes of Muslim men being backwards or lazy sheiks, while her own female orientalist gaze remains fascinated by the specter of polygamy. Her consternation/fascination as an American foreigner concerning polygamy constantly alternates with impulses to act as native informant who can explain Mazrouk to the reader, and justify her own romantic interest in a Muslim man. Polygamy, and its association with harem fantasies, royalty and oriental deceitfulness are recurring tropes that link how Hakim frames both Marzouk and Fahad through her adaptive agency. Yet she also introduces a seed of doubt into such auto-Orientalisms when she observes that "It was difficult to understand how a man such as he could be judged and placed in such a position merely because of his religion" (9).

Hakim humanizes Marzouk in Euro-American civilizational terms, and class partially overrides his ethnic Otherness. The material referentiality to Beirut, as a transnational business hub in the 1950s (Fregonese 316), and to their encounters in international nightclubs or luxury hotels represent an elite cosmopolitan space that offers the potential to transcend narrow US racial hierarchies. Hakim applies this potential selectively. For example, she extends this humanization only to her family and the Kuwaiti Muslim businessmen she meets, ignoring the local Muslim

Lebanese population. She only acknowledges those "Lebanese sects" that frown upon polygamy, which merely marks the various Christian Lebanese ethnic identities as compatible with American interests. If Muslim Lebanese or Syrians appear in her memoir, it is either as a mass of Muslimwomen or as an angry mob that chases Hakim and her friends off the street in Damascus for wearing revealing clothes (26). In this latter instance, Hakim uses the mob as a foil to claim not just her superior American womanhood, but also a specifically cosmopolitan position. On their way back home to Beirut in the car, Hakim and her friends "sang, clapped, and talked" and "The course of our conversation was a peculiar one—French was spoken—Arabic was spoken—English was spoken—and we all sang in Spanish" (27).

Hakim places Marzouk firmly in this Euro-American cosmopolitan context. She, of course, precedes the advent of present-day neoliberal multiculturalisms (Melamed), but her representations of Marzouk already begin to use the terms of what Mahmood Mamdani calls a "good Muslim." Mamdani asserts that contemporary representations of Muslims in the US usually run along the lines of them being either "good" and compatible with Western expectations, or religious, backwards and thus "bad Muslims" (766). Hakim draws this good/bad binary selectively along the class and ethnic lines of Lebanon. Her gendered auto-Orientalism directly opposes the religious stigma of the backward Muslimwoman to the good Muslim businessmen mediated through her subject position as the romantic heroine. In contemporary sheik narratives the relationship to the white heroine is essential for the sheik to become a 'good Muslim' (Jarmakani, "The sheik" 1006). Hakim's memoir, in its function as an Arab American sheik narrative, departs from this pattern in two ways: first, Marzouk eludes her, there is no romantic union. Hakim is desperate to have more contact with him and frustrated by the fact that he keeps his distance. Marzouk's own restrained behavior, unlike Fahad, places him outside of Hakim's reach—inverting

the gendered, power dynamics of sheik narratives. Second, in justification of *her* active pursuit of *him*, as a Christian Lebanese American woman, the frames of modern American womanhood or sheik narratives are not enough. Hakim has to account for his Muslim Otherness despite their shared class status and Arab connection. This prompts Hakim to directly address the question of Islam and the relations of Christian and Muslim Arabness in a 'new' way, via religious affinities.

To explain the related histories and shared spiritual reference points of both Islam and Christianity, Hakim ventriloquizes 'inside,' quasi-native information via the figure of a local Christian priest. In this way, Hakim is able to increase the implied reader's understanding of Islam without implicating herself as allied with Muslim Otherness. Hakim builds this narrative performance into a long description about a guided journey to Jerusalem, where she travels with a Christian priest. Among the participants of her group are two Muslim girls. The two Muslim girls remain voiceless in Hakim's memoir, but their physical presence in the group demonstrates their openness to and interest in visiting Christian sites. In acknowledging their presence, Hakim offers her most 'individualized' references to Muslim women as 'normal' humans, which sets the stage for her intervention into the oppositional rhetoric of Christianity and Islam as antipodes. Here, she does not resort to Arab heritage to forge commonalities, but rather uses religious arguments to deconstruct the perception that Islam and Christianity are opposites through the authoritative voice of the priest himself:

> While almost everything of Christian faith conflicts with the Islamic religion, the girls asked no questions nor did they show any signs of doubt or disrespect. They were almost unnoticed among us. Later, when alone, upon questioning, Father Farris explained to Louise and me briefly the basic principle upon which the

> Moslem religion is built. —they believe in God as we do. They also believe that there is only one God, as we do. Next to God (Allah) is Mohammed, whom they believe was a prophet of God, the greatest of all prophets. They believe that Jesus was nothing more than a prophet, not the Son of God. They do believe in the virginity of His mother and they do respect Mary as the mother of Jesus was a good man [sic]. There is no Divine Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they believe, and so Jesus to them was simply a man. Their religion allows them four wives at one time, providing they can be taken care of. Their bible is the Koran, written by Mohammed their prophet (19).

The local priest points to the significant theological overlaps between the two religions (the parallels to Judaism are not mentioned) and the repetition of "as we do" attempts to break the dichotomy, albeit on hegemonic terms that only value assimilation to the 'American' standard.

By ventriloquizing information on Islam through the local priest, Hakim then positions her narrative voice as the unmarked American who can remain skeptical of Islam, while expanding 'her/our' understanding. The stylistic choice to 'ventriloquize' can also be read as a formal adaptation of American literary traditions. Mita Banerjee has shown in her analysis of ethnic ventriloquism in nineteenth century American literature that the appropriation of an ethnic voice is a central marker of the white American literary gaze. Hakim thus can explain Otherness *and* assert her Americanness. This narrative performance allows her to conclude that "whether Christian, Moslem, Hebrew or non-believer, there is but one God, and regardless of what fashion we choose to worship him in—whether we call Him Jesus, Jehova or Allah—He is the Father of us all" (19). The specter of Islam, present in her representation of a shared Arab heritage between

Marzouk, Fahad and herself, also impacts Hakim's own affiliation with unmarked whiteness. In terms of adaptive agency and sheik narratives, I argue that the subject position as romantic heroine offers Hakim a degree of stability in her proximity to whiteness that allows her to mount this challenge to the orientalist racializing of Islam. This in turn enables her to embrace her status as a cultural Arab insider and American citizen with less friction. Ultimately, Hakim's emphasis on potential Muslim/Christian religious solidarity within Arab communities stands out as her most explicit attempt to fight orientalist Othering.

Beauty Politics: From US Cold War Cultural Diplomacy to the UN Arab States Delegation

Hakim's adaptive agency shapes her personal self-representation as well as her interactions with the political context at large. She is so successful and popular in Lebanon that her presence captures the attention of the USIS (United States Information Service) in Beirut. Hakim's visit to Beirut propels her into US Cold War soft power politics, which turns her stay into a cultural diplomacy tour. Her appeal for Cold War politics rests on her Lebanese heritage and her performance of American womanhood as an 'ethnic' beauty queen. Hakim describes her daily routine and explicit cooperation with the USIS as follows:

> As Miss Lebanon-America I had been interviewed almost every day since my arrival, and photographed and entertained. I was working with the United States Information Service and the American Consulate in publicizing the gesture in the belief that it would strengthen relations between America and Lebanon (4).

This chance cooperation places Hakim in the midst of the United States' emerging imperial interests in the Middle East.

US Cold War politics exported cultural productions to invite the decolonizing Third World nations to align themselves with the US, as a distinctly different and more understanding hegemonic power compared to the declining British Empire. While the US deployed cultural diplomacy all over the world, the Middle East became a central area for American foreign policy interests due to a variety of colliding factors: the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union, decolonization, the foundation of Israel, and (misguided) assumptions about oil shortages, all of which turned oil into a foreign policy priority (McAlister 40-42). Attie points out that 1950s Lebanon in particular became a battleground over Anglo imperial hegemony (5). Nevertheless, despite their struggle for a competitive advantage in the region, the UK and the US still co-operated to maintain imperial power structures. Culture, including the construction of gendered differences, was one of the strategic avenues to maintain or impose imperial Anglo hegemony (Lewis 9). In 1954, President Eisenhower dedicated special funds for cultural and artistic fields, inspired by the success of the musical "Porgy and Bess" in countering Soviet charges of US racism (Eschen 4). Thus, American cultural sponsorship of intellectuals, events, and institutions overseas began to "inoculate the world against the contagion of Communism, and to ease the passage of American foreign policy interests abroad" (Saunders 2), resulting in a twin strategy of deploying military hard power and cultural soft power simultaneously.

The most prominent forms of cultural diplomacy were the State Department sponsored jazz tours, which also came through Beirut in 1956 (Eschen 33-37). However, soft power involved not only sending artists and intellectuals on tour, but also exporting notions of an idealized, "modern womanhood" to other parts of the world. A major example of the deployment of idealized

womanhood as part of the twin strategy is the post-World War II US occupation of Japan. The US brought in both military forces and a brand of modern American womanhood as part of their nation-building project. The US command specifically targeted Japanese women with icons, magazines, beauty pageants and jobs geared toward establishing precedents of modern, public womanhood. American policymakers envisioned distinctly gendered ideals as tools to establish a cultural hegemony during the Cold War that could contain communism abroad: "This idealized female was portrayed as a beautiful, cosmopolitan, and progressive individual who took an active role, not only in the home, but in society as well" (McAndrews "Beauty" 85). Malia McAndrews' description of export-brand, modern American womanhood fits very well with Hakim's public performance as a travelling beauty queen in Beirut. In light of the program's strategic deployment of idealized American womanhood, it was likely Hakim's successful performance of "modern womanhood" that piqued the Beirut USIS office's interest. Beyond Orientalisms and nationalisms, it was thus also the convergence of US Cold War politics and 1950s notions of ideal American womanhood that opened a window of opportunity for Hakim's transnational political agency as a beauty queen.

Hakim's memoir only occasionally mentions her co-operation with the USIS, but the personal and the political become inseparable here. Her self-fashioning as an Arab American woman reveals a double cultural diplomacy mission: for Lebanese nationalism as much as for American benevolent imperialism. In 1955 Lebanon, these two causes were still fairly aligned, while other states in the region favored Nasserism or Communism. The economic boom years allowed the Chamoun presidency to dampen ethnic tensions within the nation, but when Chamoun officially accepted the Eisenhower doctrine in 1957—the doctrine that sought to contain the Soviet threat in the Middle East via economic support and, if necessary, military intervention—he moved

the nation toward conflict. Muslim Lebanese considered his official allegiance with the US as breaking the national pact: the established power balance between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon since its independence in 1943 (Yaqub 3-7). From the American side, jazz tours and other measures of cultural diplomacy designed to establish benevolent supremacy were hardly peaceful either, given that they were frequently accompanied by CIA operations and other forms of intervention (Eschen 5).

Hakim's personal observations at times reveal these larger political tensions and her own relation to them. In one instance, on a family excursion to Tripoli, she proudly describes her private observation of the US Navy lying in the Tripoli harbor:

> Entrance to Tripoli from Beirut is through the harbor made so well known through the United States Marines' theme song. And there it was—stretching North lazily for miles—congested with rafts, small fishing boats deserted on this Sunday morning, a few yachts privately owned and the mammoth luxury lines. Here was the Tripoli Harbor unchanged by time produdly [sic] submitting the two contrasts of centuries. Anchored moitinless [sic] in the waters just a short way from gigantic luxury liners were several American war ships, which, too, on this hot Sunday morning seemed deserted and sleepy, but non the less [sic], prepared for quick action (10).

This description not only establishes orientalist binaries of Eastern laziness and Western superiority, but also testifies to the growing military ties of Lebanon and the US in 1955, as well as eerily foreshadowing the US military occupation of Beirut in 1958. Hakim's observations thus

inadvertently point to the military threat that underlies and complements her double role as Lebanese nationalist and US cultural diplomat. In this passage, she is proud of the "timeless" Lebanese heritage, but she actually identifies with American military and cultural superiority. Her gaze is steeped in imperial and orientalist perceptions, and she performs patriotic Americanness by adapting one of the earliest American orientalist discourses. She revels in discursive memories of the "shores of Tripoli" from the Marine's theme song, which actually refers to the first imperial engagements of the US overseas in the Middle East: the Barbary Wars of the early 1800s off the coast of Algeria (Schueller).

Hakim's adaptive agency picks here an US orientalist-nationalist foundational narrative and applies it, with pride, to her Lebanese setting. I am, however, less interested in her geographic mixing of various Tripolis than in the fact that she uses US orientalist tropes to position herself in this instance as an American first and a Lebanese second. The scene above runs along classic orientalist binaries that Hakim overlays in her descriptions of the boats and the harbor as stand-ins for people: the lazy Arab locked in an unchanging past, needing American guidance and protection in order to progress. The presence of luxury liners and American war ships represent the twin forces of capitalism and the military, as well as signaling temporal difference by representing modernity as opposed to the old harbor itself. These symbols of American prowess and military superiority, encapsulated in their ability for "quick action," would be demonstrated in the American invasion of Lebanon in 1958.

As cultural ambassador, Hakim promotes her sponsors and Lebanese tourism without any hesitation; however, travelling in the region to Jordan, Jerusalem and Syria she cannot help but notice the Palestinian cause: "the existing Palestine situation became more clear each day—also the danger. The resentment toward Americans from Arabs (because of financial and moral help to

Israel) also became clear. It was slight—but definitely firm" (10b). Her memoir, written for the American market, frames any reference that could be construed as overtly political so that it only shows her co-operation with the American government agencies in Beirut. She claims that the Consulate and the USIS instructed her "as to what could be said and what could not (this was routine with important visiting celebrities from the United States, I learned)" (10a), which implicitly acknowledges both an ideological bias and USIS censorship. At the same time, Hakim is clearly pleased to refer to herself as a "visiting celebrity," and she locates herself explicitly in the services of American cultural diplomacy even though she resides in Beirut at the invitation of the Lebanese government. The specter of the Palestine/Israel conflict further amplifies these small moments of national ambiguity in Hakim's affiliations, which shed light on the 1950s as a particular moment in the transnational history of Arab Americans.

The bulk of her memoir addresses romantic plots and her personal life, but Hakim chooses to include one episode where the press pushes her to comment on the situation of Palestinians. A decade before the watershed moment of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, Hakim's narrative of her experiences in Beirut (and later as UN staff) shows that the formation of a pan-Arab American identity was already an ongoing, trans/national process. For example, the Palestinian cause had long been a prominent Syrian-Lebanese American political concern, but after 1948 even more so and Hakim's account supports this view. Hakim observes Palestinian dislocation during her travels, and her description of these moments reveals a sense of transnational Arab American solidarity before 1967:

> Since I had traveled on Middle East Airlines to Jordan and had seen several reguree [sic] camps there through the planning of Mr. Najar with the Middle East Airline

> branch there, it was felt that a statement was in order. It was difficult to refuse to comment—however, a statement was given out saying that I had found Jordan and the Arab world in general progressing surprisingly well and the future looked bright. I recommended the middle [sic] Eastern part of the world to all tourists, and also their airlines. Although this was not in the nature of their request, it was accepted and appeared in the following day's papers with pictures and story of my return to Lebanon. Later at the American Embassy it was felt that such a statement was quite in line with my position as a tourist (10a).

I quote this passage at length to show the drastic shift in her voice and tone, compared to the predominantly direct speech and chatty/oral form of the memoir. The use of the passive voice here obscures who exactly felt the need to comment on the refugee situation, but both the interest of the Lebanese press and the planning of Middle Eastern Airlines indicate the local importance and interest in what the American (and Lebanese American) beauty queen had to say. While Hakim remains in line with the expectations of the American embassy and her role in promoting business and tourism, her passive voice also reveals a passive resistance against the officially scripted response. Her expression of difficulty in responding, and the fact that she includes this episode in her account, discloses a conflicting sense of Americanness, one that cannot dismiss feelings of solidarity with Palestinians as a hallmark of Arab American ethnic identity.

After Hakim returns from Beirut, she moves to New York and starts working for the UN. In the chapters that describe her years in diplomatic service, Hakim's memoir offers even more pronounced evidence of pre-1967 feelings of transnational Arab political solidarity. As a member of the Yemen Delegation, which cooperated with the general Arab States Delegation and the Arab

League, Hakim had "come in close contact with the horrors of war while not in actual combat" (33), referring to wars in Algeria against France, Israel against Arab States and Yemen against the British. While the Arab-Israel war of 1967 is widely considered to be the event that united Arab Americans politically against biased and poor media coverage in the US, Hakim's account again demonstrates that the role of media was already a unifying factor in the 1950s. She sees her work as part of the effort to "counter-act the one-sidedness of the American press in presenting the daily reports of aggression in Algeria" and that she "is charged with the education of the American public on the Arab side of the struggle for freedom" (33).

The chapters and extra material on her years in New York center on her relationship with Fahad, but Hakim's narrative voice occasionally foregrounds the international politics surrounding her, such as the ongoing wars in Algeria and Israel as well as the conflicts with the Soviet Union and China (*Extra 1* 11). Also here it is worth noting which conflicts she mentions and how she describes them. For example, even though she works for the Yemen delegation, she rarely mentions the British occupation. She is also on duty during the American invasion of Lebanon in 1958, but does not mention president Chamoun or any of the US American political actions. She claims to stay clear of inner Arab conflict: "I found myself torn between the Moslem aspects which were pro Nasser and the Christian, anti-Arab, pro Western Lebanese" (*Extra 5* 9). In her explicit commentary, Hakim retreats to the traditional Syrian-Lebanese American stance of US neutrality and professes "not to form any opinion of any side" (*Extra 5* 9). Yet her personal views of conflicts in the Arab world clearly favor pan-Arab solidarity, particularly when the conflict involves not Anglo-American but French imperial power, as French cruelty was the "current problem in March of 1957" (33).

In her political role as a secretary at the UN, Hakim encounters the limits of the public reach facilitated by beauty culture in the US. Respectability politics may define her public self-representation to a lesser degree than it did for previous generations of Syrian-Lebanese American women, but as a woman in public office she is limited by what we could call 'beauty politics' in the 1950s. I do not know how exactly Hakim got her UN position, but her former status as Miss Lebanon-America undoubtedly played a role. Hakim emphasizes herself that the pageant was a "transformative" experience—not just in terms of her career, but also in the development of her world view. Her pageant victory triggered a journey from an office in Detroit, where she held vague notions of the Middle East as a mysterious desert, to New York where dignitaries from all over the Middle East gather regularly in her living room (*Extra 6* 10). However, both as a beauty queen working for the USIS in Beirut and as a female secretary in the 1950s UN, Hakim was neither expected nor supposed to express partisan or political opinions. Hakim does not reveal many details about her actual work, but her memoir reflects that representative duties at speeches, parties and receptions were a central task—a task Hakim relishes, but that confines her diplomatic work to 'womanly' duties. Finally, Hakim may not be able to comment directly on politics without transgressing the boundaries of her beauty politics, but she again uses her personal relationships and adaptations of gendered narrative subject positions to convey her political stances on French colonial politics and the Algerian war.

Hakim's roommate in New York happens to be an Algerian revolutionary who is part of Algerian leadership in exile and wanted by the French for treason. Yazid and Hakim are not lovers, but close friends: "The question of religion had never entered the picture of our friendship with M'hammed Yazid—or any other time with anyone else. Yazid knew I am Christian, just as I knew he is Moslem" (34). Hakim uses their relationship to vividly write herself into history, or at least

into a relationship to the dangers of revolutionary struggle and the stakes of Arab solidarity, which comes with a clear anti-French position. Before Hakim turns to Yazid's story in chapter eight of *Arabian Antipodes,* she includes an official policy document: the protocol of the 12th session of the General Assembly of the UN on "The Question of Algeria. Background Document. French Premier Felix Gaillard Outlines His Governmental Program on Algeria." The document, issued by the Algerian Front of National Liberation Delegation in 1957 for UN session, contains excerpts from Gaillard's speech that detail his vision for future French influence in Algeria: a "political future of a territory that cannot but remain closely associated with France." His government is ready to meet "the necessary contacts" and he further stresses French's "civilizing" influence on Algeria and the supposedly mutual economic benefits. Hakim clearly disapproves of this colonial attitude, but she does not respond through a political counter argument. She 'writes back' with a story: not a sheik narrative, but a different kind of adaptation of US orientalist tropes of romance, empire and resistance.

Hakim critiques the French through Yazid's experiences. In this chapter, she resorts to a narrative figural situation, rather than her usual first persona narration, to present Yazid's adventure. We learn through Yazid's perspective how he returns to Tunisia for secret negotiations with other revolutionary leaders. He then tries to enter Algeria to see his family, despite the danger he faces from the brutal French army as a wanted 'criminal,' and gets caught. Before Yazid left New York, Hakim gave him a medallion with an image of herself and of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. In French captivity, Yazid then claims to be a French citizen on a leisure journey. The French officers only come to believe him when they see the medallion. They ultimately release him because:

> A Moslem does not carry a Christian symbol, particularly a Moslem fighting a war against a Christian country. The picture of the girl inside the medal showed her definitely to be Western. 'A face such as this surely could not be expected to be found on barbarian Algeria,' said the French officer. 'Nor would an Algerian rebel be expected to be carrying the picture of an apparently cultured and reserved girl as the picture portrayed. Algeria does not have such women, the girl must be French.' —a dirty slam to the Arabs, but Yazid said nothing (41).

Evoking *Casablanca* (1942) rather than *The Sheik*, Hakim adapts here spy movie plots:[77] the resistance fighter against evil state powers, secret missions, beautiful (Euro-American) women in the 'desert,' as well as the capture and release of the hero—all the while repeating her previous self-fashioning as a white American woman and cosmopolitan connection in that she could pass as French. Her embodiment of whiteness, combined with the image of the Christian saint, could be read as mere self-flattery, but by ventriloquizing these deeply orientalist and racializing slurs against Algerians through the 'evil' French officer Hakim also criticizes the underlying prejudice.

Personal self-aggrandizing is hard to disentangle from Hakim's political use of adaptive agency here. Beauty politics limit her impact to 'womanly' weapons, that is, her looks, sexual appeal and implied whiteness. Without being physically in the war zone, Hakim's image nevertheless saves Yazid and she uses this episode to claim historical importance for her indirect role in the Algerian struggle: "Yazid spent ten days with his family inside Algeria, and it will never

[77] *Casablanca* as a source for Hakim's adaptive agency would support Brian T. Edwards' argument that prior to the oil shock in 1973 the Maghreb, rather than the Middle East, dominated the American imagination of Arabness. Furthermore, as a movie *Casablanca* reflects the narrative of the rise of a benevolent US empire in the wake of the US North Africa campaign during World War II, collapsing cultural and geopolitical imaginaries (40-2).

be known how much progress was accomplished in that time, how many personal contacts he made with the front line of fighters (…) ten days that could not be planned or bargained for by all the diplomats in the United Nations" (42). It would be easy to dismiss the story of her relationship to Yazid as improbable and/or inconsequential, but regardless of the matter of 'truth,' her narrative adaptive agency fulfills a range of political functions and affective re-orientations. First, Hakim values and highlights the often-marginalized role of women's influence in the UN via social networks. Second, by presenting Yazid's story through *Casablanca* tropes, she positions Muslim Algerian resistance fighters against the French empire in relation to the movie's depiction of resistance against the Nazi regime—a multidirectional and unambiguous critique of French imperialism that she could not have voiced herself given the Maronite Lebanese American historical affinities to France. Lastly, by narrating the Algerian struggle through Yazid's desert adventure, the memoir includes a critique of the "unreceptive ear of French dominated United Nations" and can at least imply skepticism about the "assurance of continued aid from Arab countries joined brotherly in the Arab League" (39)—in ways that Hakim's direct narrative voice as a member of the UN staff of the Arab States Delegation could not.

In conclusion, Hakim's self-representation in her memoir and correspondence testifies to the highly ambivalent negotiations of Arab American ethnic identity—transnationally as well as intersectionally—in the 1950s. Her memoir, and its obscurity, further reflect one of the central goals of this dissertation. Hakim's archive offers an astoundingly rich display of transnational American history through her private and intimate observations, but has remained absent from scholarship so far. If Hakim's gendered position as beauty queen and the romance-oriented, informal style of her memoir have contributed to her obscurity, it is all the more important to remedy such 'gendered' oversight and to recover traces of the cultural histories and women's

agency in Arab American community formation. Rosemary Hakim's stay as Miss Lebanon-America in Beirut was a resounding success and her memoir sheds light on her hitherto largely unacknowledged role as a Lebanese American woman in 1950s US Cold War cultural diplomacy. Contradictions abound in her self-fashioning. She was deeply engaged in negotiating her domestic racial ambivalence and in forging a position within an international, cosmopolitan elite. Her public, representative performances of transnational Arab American womanhood served both national narratives of Lebanese modernity and American benevolent imperialism. In all of these contexts, Hakim mobilizes adaptive agency to position herself as a white, American woman, but she also used this proximity to whiteness to develop visions of multi-ethnic Arab solidarity as well as the possibilities of Christian and Muslim Arab romance. Her embodied performances and narrative representations of different, 'modern' womanhoods developed a transnational frame of reference for 'Arabness' that connected her family and community across the Atlantic—testifying to both Arab American ethnic visibility and women's public agency prior to 1967.

Conclusion

Adaptive Agency and Arab American Womanhood has sought to develop new historical perspectives on how Arab and Syrian American women shaped the changing ideals and practices of Arab American womanhood through various forms of self-representation: their embodied, discursive, organizational or performative engagement with semi-public spheres. In these different modes of engagement, women could deploy what I have called adaptive agency. Adaptive agency materializes in the ways in which Arab and Syrian American women adapt or incorporate widely recognizable cultural references, performative gestures or hegemonic tropes in their self-representations. In this dissertation I have shown how such adaptive choices allowed women to manage their position in-between US racial hierarchies, as Syrian and American women. The widespread legibility of the adapted elements enabled women to place themselves in a relation to larger public spheres and to the changing national norms of American womanhood over time, which also meant they had to engage with US racial politics that sought to exclude African American and many non-European immigrant women from such ideals.

At the same time, adaptive agency's inherent performativity—each adaptation changes its meaning in a new context—also positioned women as cultural agents in Syrian American ethnic community formation. They did not passively reflect, but actively negotiate different conceptions of modernity and respectability between US American and Syrian diaspora contexts. By drawing out these different layers that informed women's adaptive agency in my case studies, I have shown that Syrian American women's cultural agency in self-representation was not just part of assimilation into whiteness, but also displayed strategic affinities to black women's struggles for national inclusion. In many instances women were also instrumental in integrating elements that

represented Syrian ethnic pride into American subject positions, anticipating transnational conceptions of Arab Americanness more commonly associated with the post-1967 era.

This dissertation has introduced and applied adaptive agency as an umbrella term that encompasses different, disciplinary approaches to how marginalized subjects access public spheres by adapting hegemonic discourses meant to exclude them. My approach to agency has drawn from political feminist philosophy, life writing, postcolonial studies, and affect theory, while the emphasis on adaptation highlights the relational, contextually shifting terms of self-fashioning and the specific import of cultural adaptations for Arab American women's self-representation. The decades after the Chicago World Fair in 1893 were marked by hegemonic circulations of exotic orientalist stereotypes in popular culture that, together with the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiments, racialized Syrian Americans in specific ways. Gender and imagined womanhoods were focal points in these processes, both in the national circulation of stereotypes and community formation. This confluence of literary, cultural and political stereotypes in imagined Arab womanhood turned adaptive agency into an effective tool for Arab American self-fashioning. Consequently, in the first half of the twentieth century, Arab and Syrian American women rarely engaged with public spheres through formal, publishing industries. With the exception of women's clubs, like the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston who produced their own organizational archives, women's presence and visibility in archives is usually mediated through other causes or political agendas. As this dissertation shows, at times women's cultural agency in my case studies registered only through photographic documentations of embodied performances that adapt what Diane Taylor called repertoires and scenarios.

Adaptive agency offers a specific methodological approach in this context, drawing on the hegemonic circulation of racial and gendered tropes to supplement what we can know and

understand about the archival traces that document women's self-representation across a scattered array of sources: family photography, newspaper archives, club minutes or unpublished memoirs. Recognizable acts of adaptive agency in these documents reflect women's awareness—sometimes acute, sometimes vague—of how they would be seen by US American and/or Syrian audiences. Their choices thus actively position themselves in relation to cultural/ethno-national frames. Their agency in these cases is often neither a form of direct resistance, nor a simple act of assimilation, but a negotiation of national, racial and various gendered norms. It is these processes of adaptation, irrespective of the exact genre or mode, that register women's agency in archives and repertoires. These traces enable a new kind of analysis: following acts of adaptation, rather than genre or disciplinary boundaries, productively works with the gaps and limited contextual material that characterize the documentation of early Arab and Syrian American women's public roles.

My case studies identify certain trends and changes in how women used adaptive agency over time. Within ethnic community formation, Syrian American women negotiated cultural pluralist ideals of traditional immigrant motherhood as well as Syrian nationalist vision of modern, yet respectable womanhood. Despite the community's legal access to US citizenship and proximity to whiteness, orientalist stereotypes and imperialist conceptions of modernity continued to racialize Syrian Americans as immigrants in the socio-cultural sphere. Adaptations of these very tropes, such as auto-orientalist adaptations for personal gain or Syrian American assertions of belonging based on a shared Christian heritage, could thus facilitate a degree of access to national norms, but always remained inherently ambivalent—and unstable. While my case studies do not represent a complete picture of Arab American women's cultural history, they raise issues about the complex dynamics of individual and communal agency available to Syrian American women.

As I demonstrated in chapter one, already the first arriving Syrian women had to navigate a US public sphere that associated them with oriental belly dancers and harem fantasies. Moreover, belly dancers' auto-orientalist adaptations of such harem fantasies, as in Ashea Wabe's performance as a harem slave at court, adapted slavery imagery to harem fantasies to increase US audience appeal. In doing so, Wabe shaped an American harem scenario that moved imagined Arab womanhood closer to black stereotypes, while Syrian Americans tended to emphasize their Christian heritage through adaptation of orientalist Holy Land tropes to claim proximity to whiteness. A notable trend here is that early Syrian American women already adapted orientalist visions of Muslim women as a monolithically oppressed Other—a conflation of race and religion encapsulated in the image of a veiled woman, a stereotype that Miriam Cooke would term 'the Muslimwoman' with reference to 9/11. Women's reader comments during the marriage debates in *The Syrian World*'s in the late 1920s reveal that these women contributors did not adapt Holy Land tropes to underline their Christian piety, but instead already invoked the Otherness of the Muslimwoman. In doing so, they could lay claim to being part of 'modern' Christian civilization and maintain respectability through piety. By pitching their Christianity against Islam, these women further sought to externalize Arab racial Otherness to Muslim Syrians, while—in an uncomfortable convergence with black orientalism in African American women's respectability politics—they used their Christianity to claim Syrian Americans as culturally fit for US citizenship.

Syrian American women thus managed overlapping relationalities to orientalist stereotypes and the US black-white racial binary. A central finding of my research is the importance of respectability politics to how Syrian American women themselves negotiated these racial ambivalences. Focusing on repertoires of respectability, in addition to its visual politics and

iconographies, allows for a multi-ethnic perspective on early Syrian American community formation beyond assimilation into whiteness. The strategic affinities between African American and Syrian American women's self-representation—whether in family photography, press coverage or women's clubs—makes visible alternative histories of how women negotiated Arabness and Blackness beyond replacement and competition paradigms. Already the fact that Syrian American women adapted African American women's representational strategies to signify class ascent and national inclusion complicates Syrian assimilation narratives into whiteness.

I have further argued that the multiplicity of racial and gendered discourses Arab and Syrian American women faced in the public sphere made it impossible to establish themselves as invisible American subjects, even if they explicitly sought to assimilate. However, this also means that these women's adaptive agency—engaging with Orientalisms, the US black/white binary and conceptions of immigrant womanhood—shaped the reception of Arab Americanness, even if they did not seek to be explicitly political. The embodied and/or discursive presence of women changed the normative frames that would otherwise have excluded them. At the very least, early Syrian American women's adaptive agency had a local impact on the visibility and affective values attached to Arabness: for example, through the overlaps between performances of US repertories of respectability and Syrian American ideals of proper womanhood.

Syrian American women also faced specific racialization due to their status as recent immigrants. The different receptions and readings of racial politics around the near-rape scene in the Broadway play *Anna Ascends* analyzed in chapter two show how intimately Syrian American racial ambivalence was tied to public perceptions of im/migrant women and prostitution, again linking oriental and black stereotypes. Internal debates about proper gender roles during the 1928 marriage debates in *The Syrian World* appear oblivious of these larger reception frames, but

contributions to the newspaper still engage with the conflicting ideals of womanhood in Cultural Pluralism (traditional immigrant motherhood), modernity (the New Woman) and imperial feminisms (which figured only American women as modern). All of these ideals had already emerged before, between the 1890s and 1910s, but the Syrian American community confronted them head-on when the second generation of American-born Syrian women came of age in the late 1920s. The crux of managing these different ideals rested on women's self-representation successfully reconciling respectability and modernity. Modernity, in its uneven and racializing manifestations, could connote both Syrian American ascent into middle-class whiteness and their supposed backwardness and Otherness as an oriental, immigrant community.

One prominent adaptive strategy to address this contradictory subject position among Syrian Americans was the adaptation, or disavowal, of the dual trope of the hyper-sexual harem woman and the oppressed Muslim woman. It has remained a prominent source for adaptive agency throughout all the case studies in this dissertation, albeit in different ways. Early family portraits and Syrian American Christian as well as Muslim women contributors to *The Syrian World* disavowed a connection to Muslim backwardness by positioning themselves against this image, while Ashea Wabe and the Syrian Ladies' stage production adapted harem tropes to enhance their audience appeal. The racial politics in all these varied adaptations remained slippery, and I would argue that, in 2018, we can clearly see that the women's oppositional adaptations of the Muslimwoman trope to emphasize Christian Syrian Americanness failed to change the racializing stigma of Arabness and its conflation with Islam for general US audiences. However, these historical cases also reflect that the Muslimwoman trope could serve a wide variety of political purposes already among the early generations of Arab Americans, before the next wave of Arab migration expanded communities after the re-opening of migration quotas in 1965. Its varied and

continued uses thus anticipate the possibility of Muslim feminist and anti-racist adaptations of the Muslimwoman in the contemporary moment, where Syrian American women writers, such as Mohja Kahf, use references to the Muslimwoman trope to challenge the racializing stigma it carries in orientalist and imperial/global feminist discourses (Koegeler-Abdi).

Within local-level community formation, however, I have shown in my dissertation that women's adaptive agency had significant impact on how Syrian American self-fashioning shaped both cultural imaginations and socio-cultural practices of womanhood. Women commentators in *The Syrian World* contested the terms of modern womanhood within a public community forum, and the clubwomen of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society in Boston changed norms through their practices. While eschewing political, discursive debates, they changed women's access to social spaces for entertainment and their possibilities for leadership roles through charity work. As a cultural institution the Ladies further adapted and presented specific plays to local audiences. Read as acts of adaptive agency, these cultural productions could also function as an indirect commentary on the Syrian marriage debates, as well as the changing gender roles for American women at large. In the 1950s, Rosemary Hakim's embodied self-representation as a beauty queen performed transnational Arab American womanhood in both US and Lebanese contexts. Her relative prominence in Lebanon and influence on US Cold War diplomacy offered her an entirely new platform to represent herself beyond community contexts, and she deployed adaptive agency most explicitly in her memoir *Arabian Antipodes*. Women's cultural and embodied adaptive agency intersects in her case with questions of authorial agency in life writing, as a multi-layered form of literary self-representation. Life-writing blurs boundaries between fact and fiction as well as memories and experiences, and Hakim adapts Hollywood tropes to manage this multiplicity; in

linking her self-narrativization to the subject position of the Arab Anglo heroine in sheik narratives, she side-steps and challenges her own racial ambivalence at the same time.

My dissertation has gathered and contextualized traces of Arab American women's cultural agency from the very beginnings of belly dancing industries and Syrian American community formation in the 1890s, up to Rosemary Hakim in the 1950s. Hakim's failure to publish her memoir in 1960 indicates the limits of Arab American women's access to the public sphere prior to 1967, especially in the more formal channels of publishing industries. Her memoir nevertheless foreshadows prominent developments that would continue to characterize Arab American cultural production in the latter half of the twentieth century. Her auto-orientalist adaptations of the Muslimwoman, for personal benefit, point to recent developments in a specific branch of Muslim women's life writing that profits from catering to orientalist audience expectations (Ahmad). However, her visions of Muslim-Christian religious solidarities and romances also resonate with the rise of feminist, anti-racist fiction in Arab American literature since the 1990s—a part of Arab American cultural production dominated by women authors (Fadda-Conrey).

Without positing sameness, I would like to suggest by way of conclusion that the continued circulations and adaptations of specific tropes in Arab American cultural productions can offer new perspectives on continuities and developments between the pre- and post-1965 generations of Arab Americans—in particular with regard to the racial politics of imagined womanhoods. The prevalence of orientalist and anti-Arab stereotypes continues to influence which kinds of texts get published, as well as how they are received. As agents in Arab American ethnic community formations throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women experienced limiting racial categories and stereotypes, but could draw on a wide range of trans/national

articulations, including orientalist stereotypes and diaspora nationalisms, to negotiate US specific racial ideologies. Arab American women writers face a similar situation today. The fact that specific tropes and stereotypes have shaped imaginations of Arabness for so long, and that they continue to do so, links the cultural agency of early Arab American women to the inherently political stakes of contemporary Arab American literature, even though the degrees of political explicitness in their adaptive agency differ. The political impact of women's adaptive agency in the early twentieth century was often implicit or the result of affective re-orientations through bodily presences/performances of certain gendered ideals. Nevertheless, precisely through such affective impacts, women in all of my case studies negotiated exclusion from national subjecthood as well as the complexities of racial ambivalence.

Adaptive agency, in a wide range of modes, media and genres, continues to shape Arab American women's access to and reception in US public spheres. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be worthwhile to explore how adaptive agency operates in contemporary Arab American literature and other modes of cultural production in our increasingly fragmented media-scapes. In terms of archival research on Arab American women's cultural histories, however, I have shown here in this thesis that tracing and analyzing adaptations of tropes and stereotypes in Arab American women's self-representation ties together foundational insights in ethnic studies with perspectives in transnational American Studies. Instances of adaptation form nodes in what Inderpal Grewal has called "transnational connectivities," flows of information, but these very nodes also engage in inter-ethnic relationalities within US specific contexts. For example, Ashea Wabe's harem scenario concretizes certain transnational orientalist flows, but it equally engages with domestic contestations around race and gender at the time. Similarly, the

Syrian Ladies Aid Society emerged out of distinctive US histories of women's clubs, while maintaining transnational collaborations with Syrian and Lebanese women's organizations.

By drawing out such relationalities and, at times, strange affinities we arrive at a different perspective of Arab American women's cultural histories: a perspective that illuminates how racial self-fashioning was never contained within one national or ethnic reference frame and was always performative, in its different modes or aesthetic choices. This perspective rejects essentialist views of assimilation or ethnic authenticity, but also works with the material impact and constraints that hegemonic racial and gendered tropes placed on Arab Americans—and in particular on Arab American women. Rethinking the racial politics of imagined womanhoods through adaptive agency thus contributes to our understanding of American histories as ethnic histories, focusing on Arab American correspondences *with* African American and immigrant communities, rather than assimilation into Anglo American norms. If we do not pay attention to women's adaptive agency, these kinds of cultural histories will continue to remain invisible in archives and US public imaginations.

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Acknowledgement of earlier venues where parts of chapter 1 and 4 have been published:

Koegeler-Abdi, Martina. “Miss Little Egypt goes to America: Ashea Wabe and the American Harem Scenario.” *Performance and Transnational American Studies*, edited by Pia Wiegmick and Brigit Bauridl (Eds), Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 137-158.

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Figure 8. *A Syrian Beauty*. In *Midway Types.* The American Engraving Company, 1894. Box 60. Call Number: 2010.51.00. *Michael W. Suleiman Collection on the Arab American Community.* Arab American National Museum. Accessed Aug. 2015.

Figure 9. *Cory Family Portrait*, circa 1890s. Series 12, box 5, *Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection*, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. https://collections.si.edu/search/detail/edanmdm:siris_arc_362148?q=AC0078-0000022&record=1&hlterm=AC0078-0000022. Accessed May 2015.

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Figure 16. *Anna Ascends (Photograph).*Call Number: Photographs C File, "Anna Ascends," Billy Rose Theatre Division of The New York Public Library. Accessed Nov, 2015.

Figure 17. *Representing the Orient*. In *Midway Types.* The American Engraving Company, 1894. Box 60. Call Number: 2010.51.00. *Michael W. Suleiman Collection on the Arab American Community.* Arab American National Museum. Accessed Aug. 2015.

Figure 18. *Fun Play*, undated. Syrian Ladies Aid Society, Folder 37. Call Number: 2011.01.11. *Evelyn Shakir Collection*. Arab American National Museum. Accessed Aug. 2015.

Figure 19. *Rosemary Hakim by the sea (2).* Box 1. Series 1. Folder 2. Call Number: 2011.07.00. *Rosemary Hakim Collection.* Arab American National Museum.

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